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SOME OTHER BEAUTY
AND OTHER STORIES

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AND OTHER STORIES

BY

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"TOWARDS MORNING," "THE SILVER VIRGIN," ETC.

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I

SOME OTHER BEAUTY

I

SOME OTHER BEAUTY

I

THE shop was poor and shabby and respectable like the street it lived in. It belonged to a frame-maker. Every day he set out a new picture to show what good frames he made. Sometimes the picture was of a battle. The Scots Greys charged at you through the dirty window pane. Their swords waved. The nostrils of the beautiful, wild-eyed horses breathed flame and the soldiers' mouths opened in a splendid, silent shout of victory. Claire heard the shouting. She had to clench her teeth hard so that she shouldn't shout with them and set the quiet, respectable street by the ears.

Afterwards when in class she said: "Magna Carta—Twelve-fifteen," her eyes shone and the colour rushed to the roots of her straight, reddish hair, and the teacher said: "Why are you blushing, child?" But she wasn't blushing—at least not as she did when she was caught doing something silly. She couldn't have explained what Magna Carta had to do with the Scots Greys charging at Waterloo—or that it was like hearing the music of a great procession, just out of sight

—just out of reach, though, one day if you ran hard, you might catch up with it.

Another time there was a picture of a young man and woman saying good-bye to each other. The girl had tears in her eyes and was trying to tie a white handkerchief round the young man's arm. And the young man smiled down at her sadly and tenderly even whilst his fingers gently prevented her. It happened that little Miss Pratt, the music-mistress, found Claire at the shop window and they stood together looking at the two lovers. And then Miss Pratt told Claire what had happened on St. Bartholomew's Eve, and that the handkerchief would have saved the young man's life. But he wouldn't be saved. Because he was brave and wouldn't deny his faith. Miss Pratt told the story as she walked to school with the little girl trotting beside her. She walked more slowly than usual, and they were very late. The classroom bell was ringing just as they hurried into the corridor.

Claire thought a great deal of those two young people. She kept them in her heart. And when she learnt the dates of battles and massacres she saw them saying good-bye to each other. And the tears came into her eyes and the teacher said: " What's the matter, child? Have you a cold? " She spoke crossly, for she did not like the children to have colds. And Claire couldn't have explained that she was thinking of all the young people who had had to say good-bye to each other because they were brave and wouldn't deny their faith. Least of all could she have explained that her tears for them sprang from a queer, wild happiness.

Then it was Queen Alexandra's birthday. The class

had learnt a poem specially written for her by the Poet Laureate. It began:

"Sea-king's daughter from over the sea——"

They were to say it all together. Their young, clear voices made the drab classroom ring with the sound of waves and the rushing of winds. On the way to school Claire stopped at the shop window, and there was a photograph in a gilt frame of a lovely woman with a wonderful crown on her piled-up hair, and an ermine cloak hanging from her regal shoulders. She sat with her arm resting on a table and there were jewels on her white hand. She looked straight past Claire into the far distance—so proud and kind and sad, as though she were looking for a ship to come and fetch her home.

"Sea-king's daughter from over the sea——"

Claire had never been in a shop by herself before. She was frightened, and the frame-maker could hardly hear what she said.

"The picture of our dear Queen? It's half a crown, little girl. It's a lot of money, isn't it? But queens are expensive——"

The man was making fun of her. He didn't believe that she had half a crown. But that, in fact, was just what she had—just half a crown in pennies and half-pennies in her money-box.

And so she was able to say quite firmly: "I will come for the Queen to-morrow morning, please."

That day the class stood up before the head mistress and recited, "Sea-king's daughter——" like one man. And Claire's heart swelled hot and big in her breast so that her voice broke. (But there were so many voices

that it didn't matter.) A dull grey curtain had gone up and she saw everything at once—the sea and far distant places and brave men and women and great kings and queens. She would never forget how she had seen them. She would put the Queen's picture on her table by the bed, and every morning she would say: "From over the sea" to her. (That would be after she had said her prayers, of course.) Then the colourless little bedroom and her own small, cold self would melt away and the world quiver into light and wonder. It was as though the procession had turned the corner and caught Claire into its shining ranks, and that now she would march with it for ever.

But in the evening when she got home her mother reminded her of Bob's Christmas present. Bob wanted a model steam-engine. It was very expensive, but if they all saved and put their pennies together they could buy it for him. Wouldn't that be a wonderful surprise? Words came tumbling out. Claire's mother looked at her and laughed, as she did when she wasn't pleased.

"Don't be silly, child. You don't really want it. It's just a fancy. But Bob really wants his engine. . . ."

Bob was going to be an engineer. So, of course, he had to have his engine. He was going to be rich and famous, and help father and mother, who weren't rich at all. Mother and father couldn't afford absurd fancies.

So next morning Claire walked very slowly to the picture-shop. The sky and streets and houses were grey with softly-falling rain. The Queen was gone from the shop window. She was waiting inside to be fetched

home. And Claire could hardly make the shopkeeper understand. It was as though her voice were dying in her.

"It's because my brother—you see, we're buying him an engine. . . ."

But the shopkeeper was annoyed. Lots of people had wanted to take the Queen home on her birthday. And now he'd have to wait another year.

II

Claire's mother and father lived in a little house in a row of little houses. The houses were all alike. They were red-brick with grey stone facings and two gables and stained-glass fan-lights. They kept very close to each other. They had a set expression like that of people who are afraid of being recognized by someone who might do them mischief. Inside the dim, narrow hall-ways, crowded with umbrella stands and baby carriages, you smelt their fear. Everything in the little houses was afraid. The people who had lived in them for years had a hunted look as though at any moment they might have to run for their lives. They were like the bulbs that struggled up out of the starved soil of their tiny gardens—pinched and furtive and colourless.

After the Queen's birthday everything was more afraid than ever. There were doctor's bills for father who had been ill. Someone in the City was angry because father had had to stay in bed for a week. Bob wanted to go to a technical school, but there wasn't

money enough to send him. He loafed round, rough and discontented; and once, though he was just a boy, he came home drunk. Mother put him to bed and pretended to father that he was ill. But she couldn't pretend to Claire. She cried terribly. It wasn't Bob's fault, she said. It was just that he hadn't had a chance. He didn't know what to do with himself. But she was afraid——

Claire wondered if the people in the history books had ever been afraid like this. But she couldn't see them clearly any more—they were almost out of sight, with their music and their banners. And it was difficult, too, when everyone was so worried, to sit quiet and hear the thunder of strange waters, the singing of wind through the masts of a tall ship, the shouts of soldiers, the proud words of a Queen of England to her people before the victory, the flutter of mysterious, bright-winged birds. The colours were all fading. The world was growing so small—so small. Soon it would be no bigger than the frightened little house and the grey streets that led to it from school. Soon there would be no one in it but people like father and mother and Bob, and the pale, harassed school-teachers.

Now when they put the Queen in the shop window Claire saw that her mother had been right. The Queen had been just a fancy. Claire stood sorrowfully in front of her and said: "Sea-king's daughter" under her breath like someone trying an old magic. But the spell was broken. Claire didn't want the Queen any more. It made her terribly unhappy. Not wanting her was a little like death.

If only she could want something again like that! She would never let it go—never, never.

It was dark when Claire got home. Somehow in the darkness she was always happier. The street lamps were like bright faces watching for her. The little house was a home where people took refuge. And to-night there was actually a light in the front room and a flicker of fire between the curtains. The front room was never used except on very special occasions. It was a chill little room, crowded with frail, uncomfortable furniture that Claire's mother and father had bought when they were young and fanciful. There were pictures on the walls of eighteenth-century lovers quarrelling and making it up again, and of eloping couples and forgiving fathers toasting them at the village inn. The front room seemed to tell you that everything came right in the end. Yet when you went into it you felt that someone lay dead there. You could smell dead flowers.

Claire wanted to creep upstairs. She dreaded visitors. They were like her mother—only she didn't love them. She didn't have to love them. They looked at her with cold, dead eyes. They talked about the weather and their neighbours. The magic had gone out of them for ever.

But now Claire's mother called to her and she had to go. The open door was like a frame of a *tableau vivant*. On one side of the picture sat her mother in her shot-silk dress with the puffed sleeves, bending over the best tea-things. On the other stood her father and Bob. Her father gazed at her solemnly over his glasses. Bob was all flushed and excited-looking, and

yet sullen, too, as though he were half-angry. And then in the long glass by the mantelshelf Claire saw the reflection of a pale, astonished little girl with a reddish pigtail over each shoulder.

But all these people were little figures in a shadowy background. . . .

" Claire, come and say how d'you do to your Aunt Bertha, dear. . . ."

The lady sat in the armchair by the fire. She sat at ease. She made the chair into her throne. The rich furs had been thrown back from her wide shoulders. The big hat with the sweeping plume was like a splendid gesture. Under it Claire saw a lovely, familiar face that looked at her thoughtfully, kindly. On the white hand lying on the arm of the chair was a great drop of deep green fire.

" Claire—wake up, child——"

The dead, cold thing in Claire's breast moved. It began to burn and ache. She came obediently and stood at the lady's side. A vague, heady sweetness enveloped her. The hand touched hers—held hers in a strong, light clasp—and she felt that the green fire was cold as ice. She longed to take it in her own hands and look deep into it—right to the very bottom.

Aunt Bertha. Father's sister. They had spoken of her under their breaths. They were ashamed. An adventuress. That was why Claire had known—had recognized her with such a flashing leap of the heart. Joan of Arc—Boadicea—Charlotte Corday. They had all looked like that as they had marched past her in procession—a little weary, a little battered—but so beautifully, so splendidly unafraid.

Now Aunt Bertha had come home. From South Africa. Lions—jungles—vast, open spaces—battle-fields—men fighting, living, dying. Adventurers all. She was rich. She was going to help Bob. The little room quivered. The grey figures were like moths round a flame. Claire heard Bob muttering his thanks. No one spoke to Claire. She stood at the lady's elbow. The dark green light on the white hand seemed to spread and spread until it was like a sea in which Claire lost herself. She felt that she was sinking into it. And at the bottom were unimaginable wonders—mermaids and lost galleons, strange iridescent flowers floating with the tide, great fish like flashes of moonlight. A sob gathered in her throat. She was so terribly—terribly happy. She heard voices afar off. She tried to escape from them. But they came after her and dragged her up—up out of the green depths.

"Claire—your aunt is speaking to you."

"Claire—what does Claire want?"

"Oh, the ring—the lovely ring!"

She heard the brief, aghast silence.

"Claire—how could you?"

"My emerald—do you like my emerald?"

Aunt Bertha had taken it off. She held it thoughtfully extended in her own beautiful hand. She slipped it on to Claire's ink-stained, grubby finger. Someone laughed. It was Bob laughing. But Aunt Bertha was quite grave.

"Would you like a ring like that?"

"Yes," Claire whispered.

"Claire always wants such stupid things," her mother said. "She is a vain, silly little girl."

"It's not vain to want lovely things."

But Claire knew that her mother was ashamed. She crept away to the window. The rain ran down the window like her own tears. She heard the murmur of soft laces—the stiff rustle of her mother's silk. A hand rested on her shoulder—briefly, compassionately.

"Perhaps—when you are grown up, little Claire . . ."

They were all out in the hall saying good-bye. She couldn't go. She couldn't bear it. She bent her burning head against the cool glass. A carriage rolled up to the door and carried away Aunt Bertha and the green ring for ever. It grew dark again and the warmth and light faded out of the little house.

Claire heard her mother moving about the room behind her. She was pulling the chairs straight, lifting the unburnt coals from the fire. She was angry because Claire had asked for the green ring. She would never let her have it. But the people in the procession understood. They knew all about the green ring. They had green rings themselves. They wore them like talismans. And Claire must have one too—they reassured her as they marched by through the dark rain, with their banners and their music. "When you are grown up, little Claire," they said. And she stopped crying. She nodded back to them bravely. And the nod was a promise—a promise made to them, and to someone deep inside herself. A sacred oath.

III

In her unreal life Claire wrote the lives of people she had never met. She wrote of places she had never

seen. She kept those stories hidden, for they were just fancies. People like Claire couldn't afford fancies. In her real life she was a pupil-teacher. That meant that she taught the little girls in her old school and studied with the big girls, so that one day she should become a real teacher and earn her own living. It was the best she could do, everyone said. For she had grown up quiet and plain, and it was unlikely that anything wonderful would happen to her. She would stay at home and help her father and mother, who were growing old.

So she walked backwards and forwards between the school and the little house just as she had always done. She didn't look at the picture-shop any more. But sometimes she stopped at the jeweller's at the corner of the High Street. In the day-time it was just a common little shop. But in the evening, under the electric light, the cheap rings and bracelets sparkled with a meretricious glory. And once her heart almost stood still, as though suddenly she had come face to face with a friend from a far country. But at once she saw that it was a mistake—a chance resemblance. And she and her heart resumed their quiet, patient way.

People used to notice Claire's hands. They weren't beautiful at all. They were thin and starved-looking, like the claws of a bird. But she cared tenderly for them. No one knew why she kept them so soft and spotless, and it made her mother angry to see how every evening, after the dish-washing, she would rub them with cream and coax back the cuticles of the ribbed and brittle nails. No one knew that Claire's hand was like a bride—waiting and dreaming.

When she was twenty they made her assistant-teacher and gave her a small salary. The salary helped her mother with the housekeeping. Bob was doing well now. But a young man needed all his money for himself. All the same Claire managed to save a little. She went without her lunch as often as she could, and in two years she had saved five pounds.

It was about that time that Will Challoner asked her to marry him. Will served as an assistant in his father's drapery shop. Claire's mother was very fond of him. He was a likely young man, sober and honest, and he loved Claire dearly. He came to meet her in the evenings and walked home with her. He said very little. But it touched Claire deeply that he should walk all that way for her sake. She knew that she was plain and quiet, not like other girls who would have been proud to have him. It was good of him to want her so earnestly. But somehow she couldn't listen when he talked to her. His voice was like all the other sounds in her life—low and timid and a little colourless. But just beyond his voice were other voices. They were indistinct, like those of people speaking urgently yet softly to her, through a half-open door. If she could be quiet for a little she would hear what they were saying to her. If she said "Yes" to Will she knew that they would close the door and go away on tiptoes as from someone who had died.

One night Will didn't come for her as usual, and she walked home alone. It was near Christmas time and the shops were showing their prettiest things. A new shop had opened. It was a jeweller's, but somehow quite different from its older rival at the corner.

It didn't show the usual trays of cheap, plainly-priced jewellery. It displayed big stones, set apart and blazing in a double barrage of hidden lights. For such a neighbourhood it was a wonderful sight, and there was quite a crowd outside gazing at so much wealth and colour.

Then Claire saw it. It rested on its white satin bed, alone in splendour. It was Aunt Bertha's ring. It was the same shape and size. It was like the Sea-king's daughter waiting for Claire to take her home. It was like a sudden call to arms.

She hardly knew who opened the shop door—who spoke with her small voice. The shop-man smiled at her as the other shop-man had smiled—with a veiled mockery as though he knew that she was too poor to possess all that loveliness.

"It's marked six pounds, miss. We might reduce it a little—for cash."

The colour rose darkly in her thin cheeks. She couldn't believe. She spoke wonderingly like a little girl.

"Why—I've got five pounds——"

"Well"—he whispered to another older man—"as we're new and wanting to start business, we'd take five. It's a real Dalaso emerald. It's a great bargain."

"I'll come for it to-morrow," Claire said softly.

Now it was hers. The night before she had been hardly able to sleep. And when she had slept she had wakened violently, bewildered by a sense of catastrophe—of having done something awful and irrevocable.

Everything in the little, dull, red house reproached

her. "What are you doing bringing this foolish thing into our lives? We need new carpets. The springs in the sofa are broken. The leak in the roof can't be patched for ever . . ."

Her father and mother reproached her. "We can't afford useless fancies. We need real things."

At first her heart went sick with remorse. But in the end a something resolute and passionate in her would not let her listen to the little house, or to her people's thoughts.

Now the salesman was packing the green fire into its satin case.

"It's a real bargain, miss."

"I know," she said.

She hurried down the whole length of the street before she dared to realize what she had done. Then under a lamp she unpacked the cardboard box. She snapped open the velvet and satin case. She slipped the ring on to her finger. Now was the moment of justification. Something significant was to happen from which all her life was to stream out. With this magic in her hand, life was to begin—the great adventure. She would never be afraid again.

But nothing happened. The green eye looked up at her strangely, ironically. It was as though now that she had sacrificed everything for it, it had withdrawn itself. Its depths were hidden, its fires damped to a dull glow. Thick—opaque, it stared back at her. She felt her heart sinking. But she dared not let it sink. All that money gone. Two years of work. She had to be brave. She would not even put on her glove. And under every lamp she held out her hand

to the light, hoping that now the splendour had come back.

The house knew what she had done. It betrayed her. Claire's father and mother looked at her as she sat down to table. She could feel Bob's eyes searching her with their habitual mockery, to which was added something suspicious, angry, as though she had dared to make a stand against him. He challenged her—the passionate, living thing within her. And she laid her hand quietly, openly on the table.

"Good Lord! What's the girl got now?"

"A ring!"

"An emerald ring!"

She felt the blood rising. Now the magic must stand by her—blaze up in all its vindicating courageous glory. Why did it look so strange—so dead? Why did she feel this sick sense of failure?"

"An emerald? If it were an emerald I'd think the worst, old girl. Five hundred pounds at least." It was Bob—Bob with his brutal hands, tearing her bravery to shreds. He burst into laughter. "It's synthetic—a bit of coloured glass!"

She met his eyes. She hated his eyes. China-blue—cold—dead certain. She read her fate in them. It never occurred to her to doubt. It was the conviction in herself that gave her over to him. Of course. A bit of coloured glass. The salesman hadn't even pretended. Everyone knew. A great square emerald with all the wonder of the seas in its depths for five pounds! How he would have laughed if he had known of that fantastic illusion. Like someone dying of a shameful wound, she summoned a last courage.

" Of course—it's just a joke—I got it out of a cracker."

And she began to laugh and talk gaily, feeling Bob's cruel eyes on her. The school had given a party. There had been crackers with jewellery and paper caps. She described how funny the head mistress had looked in her paper cap.

Her father and mother sat and listened in silence, unsmiling. Somehow they knew how foolish and wicked she had been. She couldn't escape the grin in Bob's eyes.

Afterwards she went up to her room. She went up the mean, narrow stairs humming a little song. But when she closed the door she began to sob. She didn't turn on the light. She hid from herself. She opened the window and took the glass ring from her finger and threw it far out into the bleak darkness. She took the stories of strange places and unknown people and tore them into little pieces. She knelt down and cried and cried her heart out.

Next evening Will Challoner met her at the school gates. It was raining. He held her umbrella over her and made her take his arm. He was tall and round-shouldered, and the hair grew in a funny, untidy way at the nape of his neck. But now she did not think of these things. She felt the warm, honest homespun under her hand. He was so real—so good.

He said, crossing the muddy road: " I wish that I could carry you, Claire," and her heart grew hot with a humble gratitude. It was as though a dying fire brightened in her—as though in his voice she had caught the echo of a lost music.

" Do you love me so much, Will? "

" So much, dear."

" Why do you? "

" I don't know—you're everything I want."

She felt the tears rise in her tired eyes.

He couldn't say what it was he really wanted. No one could. She had wanted the emerald ring, as he wanted her, for some unknown loveliness. . . .

" Perhaps I'm not what you think. You'll find out —I'm not real."

" You're real to me."

" I'll try to make you happy, Will."

She felt how he trembled. But she couldn't hear what he said. She was listening to retreating footsteps. . . .

Below the horizon a light faded.

IV

They lived in a neat, spacious house with a garden in a prosperous suburb. Will loved his garden. Thursday afternoons he spent pottering round its tidy borders. And on Sunday morning after Church he would take Claire by the arm and walk her round, and point out the little plants just showing their heads above the ground. He told her their names, and fixed labels to them so that there should be no mistake. They never grew very tall, and there was something weakly and faded about them, like under-nourished children. But Claire said how wonderful the garden was.

The three children trotted behind them—little red-

headed Joyce and the two nice boys, Peter and Ernest. And in the evening, under the lamplight they would go over the catalogues together, choosing the bulbs for next spring.

On Sunday Claire's mother and father came over for dinner. There was always a fine roast of beef and apple tart with cream, and afterwards Will dozed off and the children went to Sunday School, and everything was hushed and peaceful until tea-time. After tea the children brought in their games.

Claire's mother liked Will's home. She liked the solid Victorian furniture which he had inherited with the business from his father. No loud colours—none of this modern strangeness. She liked the quiet good taste of the Medici prints on the pale walls.

But she and Claire's father came less and less often. For they were growing old.

So sometimes Claire and Will and the three children would go over to Claire's old home and spend the day. It was rather a strain on them all, for it was a long journey, and the little house had grown smaller with the years. The children did not know what to do with themselves. When the time came to go back they trailed behind Will and Claire on the way to the station, and were fretful and over-tired with the long restraint. Mother was quiet too. She was always quiet, for that matter, but after a day in the little house there was something sorrowful about her quietness. Will didn't know what it was.

" Our Mummy tired? " he would say, pressing her arm gently.

And she would smile and admit that she was—just

a little. Once she made him go to the station by a different route—the way she had used to go to school—and stopped in front of a small, untidy shop with frames and pictures in the window. The pictures were dusty and faded, and Will yawned and said they must hurry or they'd miss the train.

Mummy was a funny little person. He teased her about her funniness—especially one day when she went to Town to buy Joyce a new coat, and when she came back it seemed that she had forgotten the coat altogether. They had been looking into shop windows, she said. She had tired herself out, so that suddenly, bewilderingly, she had begun to cry.

But it was then Will got his great idea. He took the children into secret conclave.

" It's Mummy's birthday," he explained. " It's got to be a very special birthday. We must find out what Mummy really wants."

Will was doing well in business, so they weren't to put a rein on their imagination.

" If Mummy wants the moon, she's got to have it," he said, laughing.

So they all thought very hard. But it was Will himself who solved the problem. When he told the children they could hardly contain themselves. They were always dropping hints afterwards, and Will would put his finger to his lips and scowl, and they would go into fits of laughter.

" Oh, Mummy, if you only knew——"

" Mummy, it's something you want more than anything in the world."

The colour flooded into her pale, small face. And

for a moment Will saw her as she must have been when she was a little girl, and as she would be when she was an old, old woman. And all the fun was spoilt for him. He was overcome by a queer choking grief—for her and for himself—for everyone.

" P'raps Mummy wants a real gold crown like the Queen wears," Joyce piped up. " Do you, Mummy? "

And Mummy said she wanted Joyce and Peter and Ernest. She tried to tease Will by pretending she didn't want him at all. But the children said she couldn't have them if she wouldn't have Daddy too. And they all laughed and Will forgot that he had been unhappy.

Then came the great day. Mummy was kept in the back room like a prisoner whilst Daddy and the two boys went out on a mysterious errand. Joyce stayed with Mummy, and they stood together looking out at the garden. They were very quiet.

And at last Joyce said: " Is it a gold crown you want, Mummy? "

" Perhaps it is, Joyce darling."

" They'll be so awfully disappointed."

" We mustn't disappoint them, must we? "

Then there was a loud shouting, and the honking of a motor-horn, and at the front gate were Daddy and the boys in a shining new car. And Daddy got out and touched his cap like a real chauffeur.

" The car's waiting for you, ma'am."

And they put Mummy in the front seat, and drove her round. Daddy showed her how well he had learnt to drive, reversing and turning and dodging imaginary policemen. He pointed out all the tricky new gadgets

on the dashboard—the little lamp and the cigarette lighter—and Mummy said it was all wonderful. They would go for such lovely week-end drives. And now it would be as easy as anything to run over and see the grandparents. No one had ever had such a birthday present.

" Mummy, sure it's what you really wanted? "

" What I really, really wanted, Daddy."

V

" A letter for you, Mums."

" With a foreign stamp."

" Who writes to Mums from South Africa, I want to know? "

" Hush! Dark secret. Mustn't pry into Mum's past."

They shook their heads solemnly at her. But in a minute the letter was forgotten. Even Claire put it on one side. There were other things to think of first. Getting the boys off. They were in the business now, making Dad and all the other old fossils wake up, they said. Joyce worked in the City. And she was in love. She said nothing. But there was a gentle remoteness in her eyes. One day she would tell Claire, and Claire would pretend to be very surprised. She knew she would love anyone Joyce loved. Sometimes she wanted to tell Joyce about herself—about the strange, absurd things. But then a kind of listlessness came over her. It didn't seem to matter so much any more. There

was so much to do. The boys' breakfast—their clothes —their friends—their parties—Will's medicine. Will wasn't so strong as he had been. She was like the letter. She must wait.

Now they were all gone. Quiet descended on the house. She felt like a particle of dust dropped by a whirlwind. A dear whirlwind. But when it dropped her she felt almost frightened. The quiet frightened her. She sat idle by the window, looking out into Will's garden, filling the emptiness in herself with odd, broken memories. She thought of her father and mother, who, now that they were dead, were scarcely more shadowy; of the mean gabled house, and the picture-shop, and the smiling, oily salesman with the glass ring in his hand. How funny it had all been. A real emerald and the shabby little school-teacher! Bob had known. Sometimes even now, when he came home, stout and prosperous, she thought she saw the old malice in his eyes. He had guessed. And it amused him to death to think how she had fooled herself.

She blushed faintly. She could still blush. She could still feel the shame—the sense of something precious in herself stripped naked. She took the letter in her hand, just to escape.

South Africa. Legal terms. Aunt Bertha. Aunt Bertha dead. A light gone out. Claire hadn't known till now how that light had burned in her—just that one memory of a shining, living presence in the colourless front room, and of the dark, glowing stone with its unchartered depths—its green shadows. . . . Dead. " Five hundred pounds to my niece, Claire, to

buy herself something that she wants." She felt a hand rest on her shoulder—a light, ghostly pressure.

" One day, perhaps, when you are grown up, little Claire——"

The sudden tears came into her eyes—middle-aged, faded eyes crying the tears of a little girl.

They were all excited about Aunt Bertha. They'd never heard of her. Why hadn't Mums told them? Five hundred pounds! Wasn't that splendid? What was Mums going to do with it? Something that Mums wanted. What in the world *did* Mums want? Their bright young eyes rested eagerly on her face. Their wonderful Mums. Always wanting things for them. But now it must be something for her own self.

She sat by the fire, listening to them. Her small, thin hands were folded on each other. In the firelight her gold wedding-ring shone staidly beside the half-circle of sapphires and diamonds that Will had given her on their engagement. A cheap little ring—pale sapphires and little chips of diamonds. But it had been more than he could afford. She knew that even now he looked upon it with awe as something splendid and outrageous—the great romantic gesture of his life. If she told him. But then she never could.

She imagined the emerald shining on her hand. Will's ring couldn't live beside it. Its shallow colours would be burnt dry. And he would be so hurt. He wouldn't understand. None of them would. They wouldn't say anything, but in secret they would be amused—puzzled—a little distressed to think that their wise old Mums could want anything so foolish. An emerald ring. A plain, middle-aged woman with

lined, unlovely hands and a real emerald! She saw the kindly mockery in their eyes—and Will's hurt. She looked across at him. Tired and old, too. Deep lines of worry. It had been hard going in these latter years, what with the children's education and that queer pain in his side. Now he wanted to rest.

" I've been thinking—I'd like a holiday—somewhere abroad—all of us together——"

" Oh, Mums! "

" How glorious! "

" Davos—Christmas—winter sports! "

It was Joyce speaking very quietly.

" Mums can't bear the cold."

" It will be warm in the hotel. I shall love watching you. Dad and I can go for walks. Dad loves the snow. Dad used to be a great skater—weren't you, dear? "

Will nodded. There was a spot of feverish colour in his cheeks.

" When I was a kid I won a race. I might try. I'd be a bit rusty, of course—but it comes back."

Plans—dates—time-tables—hotels. She let their voices fade into a dim background. Her eyes closed wearily. Through their thin lids she saw a lovely lady seated where Will sat. The furs dropped from the regal shoulders. The brave beauty of her face was turned to Claire. She saw its kindness, its pity, its reproach. Foolish little girl—foolish middle-aged woman——

" Something that she wants . . ."

" Perhaps—one day when you are grown up——"

" You promised."

VI

Joyce was to be married. She was so happy. She was the only place of peace in the tumultuous household. It was as though her love had kindled in everyone a raging fire of unrest, of youth and hunger. But she herself burnt steadily, peacefully.

Will and Claire wanted to buy her something special that would show her how they loved her. It worried Will a good deal. He worried over everything. He was ill. The holiday hadn't done him any good. He had tired himself out trying to forget how tired he was. Claire's love wrapped him round like a warm, soft cloak. She knew that she had never loved him as she did now that he was old and dying and afraid. How hard he had worked to make a home for her—a future for them all. And she—always she had held back something—always her inner ear had been listening for those footsteps, for that distant music that he had never heard.

Or had he heard it? Was there some unsatisfied want—some hunger in those frightened eyes that so often sought her own with that queer look of bewildered pleading? What child's wish lurked in that heart that had seemed so open to her? She would never know. But sometimes she longed to ask him: "What was it, Will? Was it a real gold crown?"

"We must give her something that she needs," he said. He fussed with catalogues. They went on long weary tours through the big shops. "They need a dining-room suite," he declared at last.

Then suddenly, almost unwittingly Claire said: "I want us to give her pearls, Will."

He stared at her.

"Pearls?"

"Just a little simple string."

"But of what use? Why, that would be absurd. They'll be poor. They need real help."

"I know—that's why. She and I—used to look in the shops together. She has always loved lovely things."

His eyes were almost hostile.

"Well, then—we could give her beads. They make imitations like the real thing."

"Oh, no—no, Will." She heard with shame the passionate anger in her voice. She tried to speak very quietly. "They're not the same, Will. They can never be. They don't come from the depths of the sea."

"I think it's a wild idea—almost wrong. But at any rate we must ask her."

They asked her that night. Joyce stood by the window and looked out into the autumn garden. The paths were red with the leaves that had fallen after Will's hard work sweeping them clear. Joyce with fancy in her eyes. Her mother sat in the shadow. She waited, her hands folded.

"It's your mother's idea. It seems foolish to me. A dining-room suite now—an antique design. We saw one at Medlow's."

Joyce turned, the young face a little set, a little desperate.

"Of course, Dad. Mother—what should I want with pearls?"

They looked at each other through the twilight. And suddenly Joyce came and took her mother in her arms and held her close—closer than she had ever done. And they cried together, but quietly so that Will should not know that they were crying.

VII

"Sea-king's daughter from over the seas"—odd tags of memory—pictures out of an old scrap-book—grown faded, merging into one another—a little girl standing in the rain, dreaming of life—brave Huguenot gentlemen going out to die for their faith—dear lovers saying farewell—the Scots Greys with waving swords on gallant horses—invisible processions marching to distant music—an old woman seated by the fire, dozing.

Will dead. Dead long since. The grandchildren grown up. Joyce matronly and grave and happy. Surely, surely happy. Little seventeen-year-old Janette, a serious young Janette with her severe dress and her solemn eyes. Going to do something real in the world—make people different—make people better. When grandmother died there would be all that money—she would do such good with it.

The old heart stirred faintly. It was like an exhausted bird beating its wings against the cage. No—Janette never spoke of money—never asked.

Will's money. Aunt Bertha's money. Something that she had wanted. They had both meant to give it her—even Will who hadn't known—hadn't understood. There had been so many other things to do.

But there was nothing now. No one to think of. She was free. The little hungry girl should have her heart's desire—should plunge her hands into those glowing colours.

She leant forward. She rang the bell they placed so carefully within reach.

"I want the car, please—I want to go out—now——"

The shopman was very courteous. He had seen the smart car outside. Otherwise he might have had his doubts about this queer old woman. It was a funny sight to see her slip the emerald on her twisted, rheumatic finger. Somehow it annoyed him. It made the flawless stone absurd—almost horrible. He tried to show it on his own sleek young hand. But she took it from him roughly.

"A thousand pounds. It's more expensive than it used to be."

"I dare say, madam. Everything is more expensive. A splendid investment. You couldn't duplicate it at that price. Whoever you intend it for, madam——"

He stopped. The sunken eyes looked at him so strangely.

"I want to take it with me. Here is my cheque. You can ring up the bank."

She was trembling. She wouldn't let the ring go. She was a little mad, no doubt. But the bank said it was all right.

Alone now. Seated before her fire again. It was difficult to believe that she was this old woman. Surely she was a young girl standing under the lamplight

with her treasure in her trembling hand. Nothing had changed—only that the treasure was real now—and that sad, strange things had happened to her hand.

She bent forward. She held the emerald to the firelight. Yes, it was Aunt Bertha's ring. Aunt Bertha, who had understood, had given it her at last. There were the same green depths—fathoms and fathoms of dreams and colours and great adventures. Once, she could have flung herself in, sinking to the very bottom, where were the mermaids and the moonlight fish and the strange, tall flowers swaying with the green tide. But not now—not now. Suddenly she knew—and her heart leapt for the last time with the wild agony of youth—she had waited too long. She no longer desired the emerald ring. She desired only sleep.

She must, in fact, have dozed a little. She grew so easily tired. She did not hear the opening of the door. She felt a hand drawing her back from a long distance. Janette's firm, gentle hand.

"Granny—you've been out. You should have told us you were going—you shouldn't have gone alone."

It was difficult to remember where she had been—what she had done. She came back by a strange road of memories. She knew that she was ashamed again. She was hiding something from wise, accusing eyes. She felt the old flush creep into her cheeks. She could feel it like the glow of a last fire. She covered the emerald with her shaking hand. For one bewildered moment she thought that she must throw it far, far out into the darkness.

"My dear—I was shopping—it was a secret——"

"But, Granny—it's your birthday—*we* ought to have the secrets."

"I know—I gave myself—a birthday present."

She uncovered the emerald ring. She had slipped it cunningly from her finger and it lay there in the wrinkled palm of her hand. It blazed up at her. Then it was gone—gone finally.

"Granny—for yourself—how strange!"

Some other beauty perhaps—somewhere beyond the shadow into which she was slowly sinking. If so she would hold fast this time. She would not wait too long. She said gently, composedly:

"Oh, no, my dear—not for an old woman. For a young girl, like you."

Grandmother didn't come down to dinner any more. Janette showed the ring to them all. It came at last to Joyce, who did not pass it on. She held it in her hand. It was as though she dreamed over it.

Janette's voice—young and cool: "What shall I do with the thing? I don't like rings. I expect it's jolly expensive. It doesn't seem right somehow—with all the poor people in the world. Couldn't I ask her to let me take it back?"

Joyce shook her head.

"No—it might hurt her. You don't understand. Wait—wait just a little. She is so very, very old."

II

LITTLE FRÄULEIN AND THE BIG WORLD

II

LITTLE FRÄULEIN AND THE BIG WORLD

I

The street was all grey. It was difficult to believe that there were so many tones of grey in the world. The low sky and the slanting rain, the tall, dejected houses, the shining pavements, the shop windows, and the solitary policeman were all different and yet one-coloured, so that they merged into one another and made a kind of melancholy harmony.

Even the serpent was grey.

Or, rather, it was a dragon, because it had legs—any number of them—and Fräulein Gertrude auf und zu und von Arnstein-Prütwitz—this was her full name as found in Gotha's Almanack, but fortunately most people called her Trüdchen—who had been brought up on the best fairy-stories, knew that all dragons had legs of some sort. But undoubtedly from a distance it looked more like a serpent, long and sinuous, and without any of that bluff and comic violence which makes dragons almost lovable.

At any rate it was a punctual creature. Every

morning at nine o'clock, when Trüdchen turned into the *Kaiserstrasse*—a street name that ought to have been painted out long since, but everyone was too tired and worried to bother about a detail like that—there it was, and at five minutes past nine it swallowed Fräulein auf und zu—and-all-the-rest-of-it, whole.

She was, as it were, almost its first morsel. But to-day things had gone wrong. They had been going wrong for a long time—ever since she could remember. It was like a tremendous toboggan-run. You started off slowly, everybody shouting and excited. Then you began to go fast—too fast—and then you lost control, and then suddenly everything seemed to go to pieces and fly off in a hundred different directions, and you knew it was the end.

This wasn't Trüdchen's description. It was her dream. The night before, it had kept on coming back. Her blanket, which was a temperamental thing full of moods and holes, was thinner than usual, and the cold had gnawed a hollow place in her middle just like that left by a sudden swoop down in a lift. So that probably the dream was natural enough. But it was a very tiring dream, and when the grey winter's morning had crept through the grey curtains, Trüdchen hadn't wanted to get up, and when she did get up she had found a large hole in one of her long, black, woollen stockings and had begun to cry. Not loudly —hardly to notice, as you might say. The Arnstein-Prütwitzs were a very old family composed exclusively of heroes, and Trüdchen's father had worn an Iron Cross when they brought him home for the last time, and Trüdchen had learned quite early in life not to cry.

But this time her mother had found her sitting on the edge of her tumbled bed, the tears trickling noiselessly down a small, white face, and the woollen stocking half off, half on, with the hole showing horribly.

Her mother had sat down beside her and held her tight. She had a letter in one hand—crunched up as though with a bitter indignation—and she, too, was trembling from head to foot.

"They don't want us, Trudi. Nobody wants us. It's all my fault, darling. I've no tact, you see. God knows what will become of us!"

And then she had caught sight of the hole and had quietly fainted.

To anyone else, perhaps, it might have seemed rather absurd—fainting because of a hole in a woollen stocking. But to Trüdchen it was the only reasonable thing to do. She made no fuss about it. She just crouched down by her mother's side, stroking the pretty, faded face with its frozen look of despair, and saying "*Lieb Mütterchen*" over and over again, as though it had been the refrain of a sad little lullaby. And indeed she did not want her mother to wake up. For when she did wake up, she would have to think about the hole, and the hole was quite hopeless—beyond repair. It was much nicer to go on sleeping.

But it so happened that Frau Hildebrandt, who ran the little haberdashery shop, behind which they had their one room, came in and said: "*Ach, du liebe Gott!*" and picked up Frau von Arnstein in her strong arms and laid her on the bed and dashed water into her face.

"You make a cup of strong coffee, Fräulein," she

commanded in her large *unter-offizier's* voice. "Quick!"

But Trüdchen couldn't. She could only stare hard into the empty cupboard. There wasn't any coffee. There wasn't anything, which was odd, when you realized that the Arnstein-Prütwitzs were such important people, and that Frau von Arnstein-Prütwitz, as an officer's widow, had a pension of so many millions that Trüdchen, who was quite good at arithmetic, couldn't count them. And then suddenly she felt frightened, as she often did. She felt she couldn't bear to see her mother's white face or tell Frau Hildebrandt about the coffee. She took her mother's purse where it lay on the table, and her basket, and set out, walking very sedately, because of being so terribly afraid. But of course it was long past nine when she turned the corner of the *Kaiserstrasse*, and the dragon's head had disappeared into the baker's shop, and instead of being swallowed up, she became the last minute vertebra in the creature's tail.

It took no particular notice of her. The policeman, who was there to keep an eye on its behaviour and see that it didn't get out of hand and take up too much of the pavement, considered her dully. The two stout women immediately in front turned to look at her, and the raindrops from their umbrellas, which she had been anxiously avoiding, trickled down her neck.

"Ach, the little Prütwitz!" they said.

But they didn't smile. Nobody ever smiled at her, except by accident. You couldn't say that they looked angry either, but there was something at the back of

their eyes which made you understand that if you touched them they would shrink away in spite of themselves. It was very puzzling, and though it had always been like that, Trüdchen never really got accustomed to it. She knew, of course, that she was a plain, disagreeable child. But then people looked at her mother, who was good and beautiful beyond question, in just the same way. And whereas Trüdchen was terribly ashamed and only wished people wouldn't look at her at all, her mother carried herself like a queen who had to live among inferior people. So that in all the little town they had only one friend —large Frau Hildebrandt who quarrelled with everyone else.

The dragon moved terribly slowly. First it stood on one leg and then on another. It was very cold, and the rain sogged through the paper soles of its innumerable shoes. First Trüdchen's feet hurt, and then they didn't hurt at all. The dragon gave a wriggle, and its last minute vertebra was shaken loose. Trüdchen was left behind, her eyes wide with distress and astonishment. The policeman waved a gloved paw at her.

"Now then—move on there!"

It seemed to her that the dragon turned completely round to gaze at her, and her button nose grew redder with shame.

"Oh, please—I can't——"

"What's that? Can't——?"

"*Ach, bitte, Herr Polizei,* I've lost my feet——"

For a minute it seemed as though everyone were going to be nice. The policeman bent down, his hands

on his thick thighs, and stared about solemnly as though he were really looking for something, and one of the stout women put down her basket and rubbed the spindly little legs in the darned black stockings until they became veritable pin-cushions, so full of pins that Trüdchen couldn't stand still, but performed a jerky dance like an alarmed marionette. But it was so wonderful to have people kind to her that she didn't mind.

Then suddenly it was over. They said: "*Na, so ist recht!*" and stood back from her and stared in just the same old way. It was as though they had remembered something they had forgotten and were thinking: "Serve you right! Serve you right!"

They were queer themselves. Even the policeman, who seemed so large and solid, made you feel that if anyone touched him too roughly he might disappear altogether. And he knew. You could see the fear of it in his round, blue eyes, and the bristling, fair moustache was somehow very sad. The people were so big, and yet they weren't quite real. They were like shadows. The street was a shadow. Trüdchen could remember—or rather it was less a memory than a picture in a whole jumble of pictures—a place full of bustling confident people, tall men in gay uniforms, and grand-dukes and princes in carriages, and bands playing music that made your heart swell, and flags flying in the sunlight, and red-cheeked boys and girls, and shops that still bulged with toys and cakes and real cream. Something had happened. It was as though winter had come for ever.

The clock of the Lutheran Church at the end of

the street boomed twelve. By this time there was nothing left of the dragon but Trüdchen, and the woman who had rubbed her legs and said "Tsh! Tsh!" at the hole in the black stocking. They stood together in the baker's shop, which had a flustered, devastated look, as though it had been swept bare by a whirlwind, and the baker's wife whispered mysteriously to her customer:

"See what I have kept for you, Frau Gephardt!" She produced a stick of bread and three shiny brown *Bretzeln* from under the counter. "I thought to myself: '*Na,* this time the Gephardt little ones shall have a treat. It's not much they get, poor things.'"

"God knows that's true, Frau Bäckerin!"

Trüdchen stood on tiptoe. She was nearly ten, but for some reason or other she hadn't grown much, and it was hard work getting the baker's wife even to see her.

"If you please, four little breads——"

And she held out her million-mark note pleadingly.

The baker's wife stood with her arms akimbo. She had a round, tight-skinned face that must once have been pink and jolly and wasn't any more. She was fat and pale, and you felt that if anyone put a pin in her she would blow up and sink to nothing, like a balloon. She had a round, hard forehead, and cold blue eyes that stared down at Trüdchen with such a lack of expression that it was like hatred.

"There isn't a crumb left," she said. "Not a crumb. Tell your Frau Mutter that if the King of England wanted four little breads he couldn't have them. So there!"

She laughed, and her laugh terrified Trüdchen, because a minute before the baker's wife had been kind and smiling. So that it was she, Trüdchen, who made people feel wicked. But she couldn't move. She stood there, peering over the edge of the counter with wide-open eyes and mouth, and from the other side she must have looked like a hungry, rather stupid little minnow. Obviously it was of no use to repeat: "Please—four little breads!" and equally obviously she couldn't go home without them. Whatever else had failed in the grey, frightening world the "little breads" had always stood firm. When meat soared out of sight or butter melted like a dream, there was still the four daily "little breads"—two for dinner and one for supper, and one (stale) for breakfast. And if you dipped them in your *Ersatz-Kaffee*, they went further and made you feel almost full.

And now they had gone, like everything else.

The baker's wife said nothing. Her lips, thin and anæmic, were pressed tight together. She wouldn't explain. She wouldn't hold out any hope. She wasn't sorry. She was glad. Inside herself she was saying: "Serve you right! Serve you right!" and her eyes were colourless and cold like the eyes of a dead fish.

Trüdchen turned slowly away. Her legs didn't seem to belong to her. They waggled this way and that under her dwarfed and wizened little body. They were much too long and thin—all out of proportion, so that they made Fräulein auf und zu, with her short plaid skirt and tam-o'-shanter, look like one of those comic penwipers that you can make out of matches, a scrap of old duster, and a ball of wool. Only some-

how she wasn't funny. Even the children in the *Gymnasium* where she went when she was strong enough, and who hated her, didn't laugh.

The woman with the basket stood in the doorway and looked back at her. She was frowning as though she were trying to make up her mind. Her mouth trembled. She might be going to smile or cry. Her face was full of kindness. Then suddenly she remembered—as everyone did sooner or later. She snapped the lid of her basket, tossed up her head, and stumped out angrily.

But Trüdchen knew that if she had been any other little girl, something wonderful would have happened.

II

One day Trüdchen's schoolmistress had told her class the story of Robinson Crusoe, and Trüdchen had said in her prim, grave way: "I wish I could be wrecked on a desert island."

Everyone had burst out into mocking laughter. And Trüdchen had set her teeth and sat very upright, swallowing her shame.

But in her heart she knew what she meant. She knew it was the truth. There was nothing terrible in being alone with bees and flowers and even wild beasts. But it was terrible to be alone in a world crowded with people. They might jostle you and almost knock you over, and yet they never really touched you. Wherever you went there was a barrier between you and them, and nobody ever crossed it even

to scold, much less take you in their arms and pet you. On the other side they quarrelled, were happy or unhappy, but at any rate they belonged to one another. You were different—it was very difficult to understand in what way, because you seemed to yourself just like everybody else—and so people hated you. When you came into a shop they stopped complaining about the price of things and looked proud and aloof. The children in the *Gymnasium* walked away from you and played in another corner. The teachers changed their voices when they read out that you were top of the class. They couldn't hide how hard it was for them.

Sometimes it was worse than that. Sometimes in a winter's dusk, coming down on a deserted street, Trüdchen could feel how all the bitter, terrible things people hid in their hearts slipped out of their hiding-places and closed in on her. She could almost see them and their lightless, hating eyes, almost feel their hands clutching at her, tweaking at her pigtail with cruel fingers, hear their malicious whisperings. And she walked very slowly, very upright, as though she had swallowed a poker, because she was so frightened. She knew that if she began to run, she would never stop.

It was like that to-day. The winter's sky hung so low and was so grey that the street was already in twilight. The fine rain had become a deluge which had swept everybody indoors. The big drops danced on the pavements like demons. It was of no use to hug the wall. They jumped into your shoes. They dragged your clothes about you in a dank, heavy

weight so that you could hardly walk. They got on to your glasses so that you were half blinded. From the pointed roofs that looked witch-like and wicked against the grey-yellow background, they came racing down together in cascades, shouting and burbling.

A great desolation was in Trüdchen's heart. She hadn't had any breakfast, and there wouldn't be any lunch or supper—unless Frau Hildebrandt took pity on them. She was wet through and cold, and there wouldn't be any fire. She thought of her mother's poor white face when she heard that there was no bread. Perhaps she would faint again. It must be very nice to faint and forget things.

A troop of schoolchildren came swarming round the corner. They wore short mackintosh capes over the square satchels strapped on their backs, so that they looked hunchbacked and uncanny in the gloomy light, like unfriendly elves. Their faces were white and pinched, without laughter, as though the cold biting rain were the last endurable exasperation. They plodded on in silence, until suddenly a boy in the yellow cap of the *Tertium* caught sight of Trüdchen and raised a cry.

"*Sieh' da—die Prütwitz—die Prütwitz——!*"

She had hoped for the best. If only this time they wouldn't see her! Quite often in the summer, when the sun was shining, they would leave her alone, but when they were hungry and cold, a kind of rage got into them, and they became like a pack of hounds. With a sinking heart she saw them turn about—hesitate, and then come drifting back.

"*Ah—ha—die Prütwitz——!*"

The terrible snigger that was always the beginning of their worst anger curled up their lips, but left their eyes cold and pitiless. They didn't look at her as though she were another child like themselves, but as though she were a strange wild beast, with curiosity and hatred. She made no attempt to escape. She stood with her back to the wall, a quaint, bedraggled figure. Her composure and prim uprightness incensed them. It looked like superiority—as though she despised them—as though they couldn't hurt her whatever they did. She was always like that—"Trüdchen-head-in-the-air" they called her—so stiff and proper and aloof. If they had seen into her wildly beating heart, with its anguish of fear and loneliness, the worst of them would have slunk away.

The best might have said: "Never mind. Come on and play with us."

But if you come of a race of heroes, you keep your wretched heart to yourself.

They hadn't touched her yet. But the circle grew narrower. They began to sharpen their stubby little forefingers at her.

"Aitch! Aitch! Aitch! *Die Engländerin!* What has the little pig of an English girl got in her basket?"

"Plenty to eat—plenty to eat——"

"All the English pigs have plenty to eat——"

"So that good Germans starve——"

"Aitch! Aitch!"

Somebody twitched the basket out of her hand. But its emptiness did not appease them. The first act of violence had set them free. They pinched

her—pulled her hair—twisted her arms with little, mean, quick movements. And she made no resistance, but stood there patiently, keeping her eyes fixed hard on a point just above their heads. The pain was hard to bear. It was sharp and spiteful—the kind that makes you go wild with rage and hit out blindly. But what hurt most was being alone and the terrible bigness of the world.

She wanted her mother. She wanted to run to her mother and hide against her. Her mother, who was so pale and helpless, became an overshadowing, sweet figure of refuge. Only she mustn't run—and she mustn't cry. She pressed her mouth tight, and her eyes stared out round and blank through the rain-splashed glasses.

"Who killed my brother?"

"And my father——"

"My three brothers——"

"Who killed her father?"

"Aitch! Aitch——!"

"P'r'aps her mother did. They say——"

Suddenly the thing she had been most afraid of happened. She couldn't bear anything any more. She was like a little mad thing with a wild, white face and flying arms and legs, hitting out frenziedly, tearing, biting—not caring. At first it was all an inextricable confusion. Everybody tumbled over everyone, and screamed and tried to get out of the way, for now they were frightened of her. The next minute, almost, she was through. They didn't even try to pursue her. Perhaps in a sort of way they had got what they wanted. For now she was

running and crying. At least, there were no tears, but the sobs tore their way out from the very bottom of her through her open, gasping mouth. And she ran and ran, quite blindly, up one street and down another, with the rain lashing her and the wind blowing her along like a wisp of straw.

But however desperate you are, you can't run to the end of the world. There isn't any end. It's round. And so sooner or later you have to come back to your own door.

Trüdchen stood outside. People passing would hardly have seen her, she was pressed so closely against the dripping wall. She could just see through the glass top of Frau Hildebrandt's shop window, and the jumble of goods on the counter had an eerie look in the twilight. But then Trüdchen couldn't see very well. Her glasses were broken.

That meant that she could never go in. Because her mother had said: "You mustn't break your glasses, Trudi darling—not whatever you do. You see, I *couldn't* buy another pair."

And now they were broken. And there was a long, terrible tear in the sleeve of her reefer coat. Poor little mother! Trüdchen wished—she wished—she didn't dare to think what she wished.

A light sprang up. It leaped through the door between the shop and their one room and was gone again. The door had opened and closed. Trüdchen could see Frau Hildebrandt's bulky form looming down upon her. It was like fate. Nothing could stop her. Nothing. Ominous and heavy she came—and yet not unkind either. Just inevitable.

Trüdchen said aloud: "Oh, please—please, don't!" though she knew it was no good.

The shop door opened with a tinkle of the bell. Frau Hildebrandt looked up the street and down the street. And then she saw Trüdchen crouched against the wall, and stood back with a nod. Trüdchen crept in. But Frau Hildebrandt laid a heavy hand on her shoulder.

"*Armes Kindchen!*" she said.

She was crying.

And so Trüdchen knew that her wish had been given her and that her little mother was dead.

III

It seemed that when people were dead you forgave them everything. But it was rather difficult to understand why. What have the dead done? Perhaps the dead don't care, anyway. But the living would have been so glad.

Trüdchen, in her new black dress and her black hat with crêpe, and her new black shoes and stockings, couldn't help thinking how pleased and astonished her mother would have been at her own wonderful funeral. The *Kreigsverein* sent a deputation to walk behind the coffin with a wreath, and three officers from Hauptmann von Arnstein-Prütwitz's old regiment (in brand-new uniforms with shining epaulettes) came with another wreath and an inscription:

"To the Widow of our heroic Comrade."

The Frau Bäckerin sent a tiny bunch of flowers.

Trüdchen couldn't be really unhappy, because she felt that for the first time her poor, lonely little mother was among friends, at peace.

On the day of the funeral there came a letter from England. Trüdchen, who had learned English from her mother, could just read it. It was very stiff and clear. It said that of course, since her German relations would have nothing to do with her, it was necessary that Trüdchen should come to England There was money enclosed. And would whoever was looking after Trüdchen let her grandfather, Sir Ambrose Hampden, know when and where to expect her? Although it was such a simple, matter-of-fact letter, anyone could have told that the writer was very bitter and unhappy about something, and didn't want Trüdchen in the least.

The night before Trüdchen left for England, she and Frau Hildebrandt had a long talk about it all. Trüdchen sat up very straight and stiff at Frau Hildebrandt's table and looked through her new glasses with dry eyes. Although she was so small and poor-looking physically, she had always been top of her class, and she could think things out and understand. And she wanted to understand.

Frau Hildebrandt had been servant to Hauptmann von Arnstein-Prütwitz and his young English wife when they had first married. So she knew everything. She told Trüdchen how happy everyone had been. One particular Christmas she could remember. There had been a sort of gathering of the clans. The Arnstein-Prütwitz (auf und zu und von) had come, and the Hampdens had come, and there had been

tremendous jollifications with toasting, drinking and joking about "*Der Tag*."

"*Der Tag*" was to be Trüdchen's first birthday. But before "*Der Tag*" came they were all killing one another.

At first, the war hadn't seemed to matter so much. They wrote to one another through a neutral country, and said it was a War of Governments and that it shouldn't make any difference to individuals. Then the Hampdens' only son was killed—murdered, so his father wrote—and then one by one the Prütwitz family was wiped out, and a great, implacable bitterness spread like an ulcer. And when the young English wife wrote home, she defended her new countrymen and accused her own people, and when the old Prütwitzs came, she quarrelled with them so that they never came again. She fought everyone—poor, exiled, uprooted little woman, breaking her heart, until at last she had no one in the world but Trüdchen and her husband. For him, too, there was no joy left. People said he was glad of that final bullet.

All this Frau Hildebrandt told in her own way, mopping up the last drop of her *Ersatz-Kaffee* with the last fragment of a *Zwieback*. And Trüdchen watched her and thought earnestly, trying to make everything clear to herself.

"But am I really English?" she asked.

Frau Hildebrandt opened her eyes wide in horror. "*Gott bewahre!* What puts such a dreadful thought in that silly head?"

"But I must be—just a little."

"*Na*—just a little, perhaps."

" And that's why everyone hates me."

" *Ach, Kindchen*, it's a bad, queer world. We poor Germans—we've suffered. The English couldn't rest until they had ruined us. God knows we are kind and easy-going. But when one is always hungry, it is difficult to forgive."

" Are all the English bad, Frau Hildebrandt? "

Frau Hildebrandt fidgeted. She was a truthful woman. It went against her principles to tell lies—even to children.

" Well, God made them, *Kindchen*. He must have had His reasons. The French are worse, perhaps."

" But my mother——? "

" Ah, there now! She was a sweet soul. If only she could have been a good German! But she couldn't. Blood is blood, my dear. You can't get away from that."

" What does it mean—blood being blood, Frau Hildebrandt? "

" Eh—what? *Na*, it just means you are what you are. That's what it means."

" What am I? "

Frau Hildebrandt looked across the table. A vague alarm stirred at the bottom of her good-natured soul.

She said solemnly and reassuringly: " You are Fräulein auf und zu und von Arnstein-Prütwitz. You must never forget that. You must carry your head high, *Kindche'*. You must be your father's daughter —a real German little girl."

But Trüdchen sat very still. She didn't ask any more questions. It was of no use. Frau Hildebrandt wouldn't tell her the truth. She would have to find

it out for herself. Even now she was beginning to understand. Because of her poor little mother there was a terrible wicked taint in her blood. So that she couldn't live any more in her own country, and her own people could never love her.

IV

Perhaps going away was a little like dying. People were sorry. The Frau Bäckerin came to the station with Frau Hildebrandt and brought three *Brezel.*

" Because," she said solemnly, " it is a long journey, and you will be hungry."

And she was fidgety and rather cross, as though she were worried about something.

Frau Hildebrandt tied a label round Trüdchen's neck with her name and English address, and felt her pockets to see that the purse and the precious passport were all safe. Without the passport, evidently, one came to a bad end. And the guard took his tip and said, " *Jawohl,*" and looked at Trüdchen earnestly so that he should recognize her. She was so small that she might be easily overlooked. And then Trüdchen sat in her corner by the window, and the platform slid away, carrying with it two stout women, one of whom was crying. And Trüdchen would have cried, too, if she hadn't been Fräulein auf und zu and all-the-rest-of-it, because Frau Hildebrandt, in spite of everything, was fond of her. And that was wonderful. But instead she sat stiffly with her hands in their little black cotton gloves folded on her lap, and her mouth

compressed, and cried inside. Which, as everybody knows, is so much, much worse.

The carriage was jammed tight with people. They were all strangers, and yet they were so like everybody else that Trüdchen felt she knew them—large, grey-coloured people who hardly spoke, but every now and then sighed and stirred in their places like tired cattle.

The train rumbled heavily along. It didn't go very fast. It seemed jaded and reluctant like everything else. The fir-clad hills of the Black Forest dwindled till at last their black crests just peered over the horizon, as though they were saying: "Good-bye—good-bye, Trüdchen," and were having a last sad look at her. Then the dusk came and wiped everything out, and presently there was nothing left but a rushing darkness and the streaming torches of the station lights as they fled past. For the train was going fast now. It was desperate. It didn't care any more.

The grey people took out bags of paper and began to eat. Under the dim lamp they looked more than ever as though they were half-dead. Trüdchen couldn't eat—not even a *Brezel*. There was a hollow place where her heart was—a terrible, dragging feeling as though something very important in her inside had been torn out and she were bleeding to death. Once she sobbed aloud, and the stout, kindly-looking man opposite her looked up from his *Butterbrötchen* in astonishment. But her eyes were dry, and she put up her hand to her mouth and said "*Verzeihung*" very solemnly, so that he should think it had been a hiccup.

Every now and then the guard came in and took great bites out of her ticket.

And each time he nodded to her and said: "*Na, wie geht's?*"

And Trüdchen said, "Quite well, thank you."

He was a little, fair, bustling fellow with snappy, blue eyes, and Trüdchen thought how angry he would look if he knew the truth. It was terrible to think how everyone would shrink away from her. She felt like a small black lie sitting there among all these sad, friendly people.

The stout man leaned forward. Something in his expression told her that the hiccup had been no good.

"Are you going a long way, little Fräulein?"

"Yes—sir."

"It must be very lonely."

"Yes."

"Haven't you any people?"

She shook her head. If only he wouldn't ask any more questions! Everyone was looking at her so kindly. They saw that she was in mourning. Poor, forlorn little girl! The stout man leaned across and took the label and read aloud:

"Fräulein auf und zu und von Arnstein-Prütwitz, bei Sir Ambrose Hampden, Stanten Court, Ayrsdale, Cheshire, Holland—Dover." He looked up at her, smiling, puzzled. "All that way, *Mädel?*"

"Yes."

"To England?"

They were all listening now. They had even stopped eating, with their *Butterbrötchen* half-way to their mouths, and in a minute that queer, withdrawn look would come into their faces. It was a terrible

thing to be very small and belong to a family of heroes who were never afraid.

" Yes."

" Have you people there? "

And then suddenly, before she knew what she was doing, she had said in a high, squeaky voice: " My mother was English."

" Ah!—I see."

The stout man nodded and sat back. Everyone went on eating. Trüdchen knew just what they felt. It was like that in class when someone had done or said something wrong. One was ashamed for them in one's very bones.

Of course, it was just chance that a few minutes later, when they slid into a big station, everyone should begin to gather up his possessions. They lumbered out into the dark one after another. They didn't look at Trüdchen—except the stout man, who turned back and patted her on the shoulder.

" Poor little Fräulein," he said.

Of course—just chance. And yet it was as though they were getting up and leaving her because they couldn't bear it. Without them the carriage grew cold and filled with shadows. The whole train seemed to have died, and the guard's voice coming down the corridor had a terrifying, hollow sound.

" Passports—get your passports ready, please."

He peered in. She was so small—so blotted out in her corner—that he had to look twice before he saw her.

" I get off here. It's the French frontier. Good luck, Fräulein."

" *Danke*," she said. " *Danke schön*."

He couldn't help laughing. She was such a prim, composed little thing.

The door slammed. The train jerked forward, throwing out a long, melancholy whistle into the darkness. In a moment they would have passed over that mysterious line. Fräulein von Arnstein-Prütwitz scrambled down from her seat. She flung herself against the closed door. All the brave ancestors were forgotten. She fought with the stiff handle that wouldn't yield.

" Oh, please—please let me out—let me go home! "

She didn't know what home meant.

A French official opened the door. He stared down at her. She looked queer enough in the dingy half-light—a comic child's figure with a crêpe hat over one ear, and a dead-white face, and round eyes behind round spectacles.

" Passports, please."

She gave him hers. He looked at it, comparing the photograph with the original. Ugly little German brat! He gave it back to her with a malicious ceremonious touch to his képi.

" *Merci, Mademoiselle.*"

She stood there in the middle of the carriage, very still, very upright, swallowing her gasps.

At least, she was glad that she hadn't really cried.

V

Monsieur Jules Leforges, member of the French Senate, got in at the next station. He had no idea

that anything particular was going to happen to him. He arranged his traps, spread his overcoat across his knees, and folded his gloved hands over his newspaper with the air of an experienced traveller settling himself down to a comfortable journey. At first sight he looked an easy-going, genial gentleman, rather stout, with a full, grey-bearded face and sparkling blue eyes, deep-set. But at second sight one wasn't so sure. The broad shoulders were held aggressively, the mouth was tightly closed, and the eyes had a harsh, fierce stare in them even when he smiled. One plump hand was a neat replica of its companion, except that it wasn't flexible. It wasn't real.

Monsieur Leforges glanced round him, as a traveller will, to see who his fellow-travellers are and whether they are likely to annoy him. He saw a little girl in the far corner by the window. He saw her, but he really couldn't be said to have noticed her. She passed in and out of his vision without reaching his consciousness, as it were. She was too small.

As to Trüdchen, she didn't see him at all. She was sitting bolt upright, with her hands clasped in her lap, staring intently at nothing.

So they chanced on each other.

Monsieur Leforges's secretary, a bright, smooth young man, glanced at her, too, and glanced away again. He liked children—particularly little girls—but he didn't care for this one. She was quite unattractive, almost half-witted looking. He smiled across at his employer, of whom he stood in some awe.

" Looks as though we might have the carriage to

ourselves," he said. " A good ending to a good day, Monsieur."

Monsieur Leforges nodded. He settled his big shoulders more comfortably in their corner and made a little, growling, satisfied noise in his throat. Oh, yes, it had been a good day, a satisfying day. He saw again, in his mind's eye, that afternoon's scene in the Rathaus. He could congratulate himself. As the representative of the Republic he had behaved with dignity and restraint. No venom, no anger, none of your blustering, brutal Prussianism. He had shown them how a Frenchman behaves to a beaten enemy. He ran his tongue over his lips, as though he were remembering a delicious wine. How the leader of the deputation—little, mean rat of a fellow—had winced and cringed under his remorseless suavity!

" You ask for milk for your children, *Messieurs*. My little son was at Rouse during your occupation. There was no milk for French children there. And so my son died. As to your invalids, I myself was prisoner for two years in one of your camps. They amputated my arm there—without anæsthetics. It appears there was some temporary shortage, and your own people came first. Naturally. *Chacun à son tour, Messieurs*."

And they had withered away before him, cringing, beaten, with hollow, aghast eyes. And he had made them a little bow, perfectly courteous.

Oh, yes, that had done him good. It was like a feast after a long hunger. During those endless years of horror he had dreamed of just such a scene, rehearsing it over and over again, adding a touch here and there.

As a Frenchman one had to observe the decencies. One was civilized. One used the rapier. One made elegant gestures. But one killed all the same.

Yes, very satisfying. He sighed and shifted his position. But it was like a feast that never satisfied you. You got up from the table with a kind of rage—a more terrible rage each time, so that it was difficult to restrain yourself. You saw red—you wanted to take someone by the throat. He knew that it was bad for him. It was bad for anyone to be constantly frustrated. What he really wanted was to be at peace—to live in the country quietly with his wife—to keep chickens—to be a bluff and kindly fellow, loved by everyone. But he couldn't go. Not until he was satisfied. It was the war. The Germans. The swine——

" The swine! " he said aloud.

His secretary leaned towards him with a little, deprecating gesture of understanding. " That's what they are," he said, " swine! "

Monsieur Leforges threw back his head. He talked rather loudly and emphatically, as though he were addressing a public meeting:

" There must be no sentimentalism," he said. " Sentimentalists are more dangerous than scoundrels. They knock a murderer down, and then they help him up again so that he can murder someone else. We are at least a logical people. We know what the Germans are—we have experienced them in our flesh. Any man who has seen what I have seen——! "

He gave an exclamation, bitter and ironic. There was no need to convince his secretary, and yet he felt himself driven by an odd necessity to convince someone.

" Look what they have done! " he said. He threw out his hand. With swift, dramatic sentences he painted a world in ruins. He had his race's gift for self-expression, and one saw the red horror of it all—the torture, the bestiality, the grey misery. " Let them die," he said. " Let the children die. They are a bad people. They are like rats. They breed like rats. If I find a baby rat in my house, I don't wait for it to grow up. I stamp on it."

He nodded and looked about him, strong and convinced. But there was only one other person in the carriage besides the secretary—the little girl with the absurd crêpe hat over one ear, and the black-gloved hands, and the dangling, black legs. She was looking at him, too. It was oddly disconcerting. Her eyes behind the round glasses stared as though they were looking beyond him to something else—something terrifying. Well, that was natural. He had forgotten her. He had said things unfit for a child's ears. He shrugged his shoulders in the loose-fitting overcoat, and cleared his throat, and felt for his cigar-case. Then a whimsical kindliness overcame him. After all, even a plain child was a child. He bent towards her gallantly, as though she had been a grown woman.

" *Vous permettez, Mademoiselle?* "

She started violently. " *Ich verstehe nicht.*"

He sat back, frowning. German—a German little girl.

" Ah, you don't understand French? "

" *Mais—mais, oui, Monsieur.*"

She continued to stare at him. Was the child an imbecile? he wondered angrily. For he was very angry

—bitterly, absurdly angry. He made a sound that was meant for a laugh, and grimaced at his companion with a rudeness that he had been careful not to show to that deputation. Then he lit his cigar and smoked in silence. He went on with his thoughts. But they had lost their clarity. It was as though someone had rudely interrupted him. Besides, he was tired. It had been a satisfying but a hard day. He composed himself to sleep.

But he couldn't sleep either. Each time he opened his eyes, there was the little girl in her dim corner, like a black image of an unutterable sorrow, staring at him.

VI

The train drew alongside the quay at midnight, and instantly the sleeping carriages burst into a distracted activity. The passengers leaned out of the windows and supplicated the porters, and the porters stormed along the corridors, banging the luggage against the sides and not caring in the least. Trüdchen had never seen a confusion like that. A big man in a blue-green blouse seized her *Handgepäck* from her and yelled a number which she didn't hear. She was quite sure that her little bag was lost for ever. Nothing would ever find itself again.

It was raining. The long, slanting lines shone in the lamplight. The platform gleamed blackly. Men pushing great trolleys or staggering under impossible loads, lurched in and out of the dripping darkness like lost souls. Everyone looked pale and tired and irritable.

The air was bitter and sticky with a strange scent. Trüdchen had never smelled the sea before. It frightened her. It lay outside her there in the night like a wild beast, waiting.

People eddied fretfully. Nobody saw the little girl in black—or if they did, they did not think about her. Of course, she belonged to somebody. They jostled her, and carried her along like a piece of driftwood to the passport barrier. Everyone showed his passport. It was just a friendly formality. But when Trüdchen came, the official grew more official. He read her name out, and compared it with a list, and looked at her hard, as though he were making up his mind to remember her next time. The people behind fidgeted. Everyone saw that she was different.

" A baby rat! " That was what the big Frenchman had said. You put your foot on it, and the little bones went crunch-crunch. She began to shake all over. It was very cold. And she had always been so frightened of rats. This great barn-like place might be full of them. She was a baby rat herself—black, scurrying, terrified, amid all these big people who hated her. And at any moment one of them might——

She slipped out of the shed on to the open quay. A wet wind swept across its terrifying emptiness and nearly blew her off her feet. She saw the sinister gleam of water, and lights that swung with a wicked magic in the black air. A ship loomed over her. She didn't think of it as a ship. It was a live thing full of bright eyes that stared malevolently. She hustled up a narrow plank into its very jaws. She didn't know where to go. The people round her seemed to be

growing bigger and bigger. They were trampling on her. She beat against them with her hands, saying, "Oh, please—please——" trying to escape. They looked down at her, half impatient. They thought she was lost and looking for someone. But there was no one for her to look for.

Then she was quite alone in the dark. She couldn't escape. A barrier high as her head stopped her short, and underneath she could hear something talking to her very softly. She couldn't quite hear what it said, but she felt that if she listened very hard, she would understand, and she didn't want to. She put her hands to her ears and crouched down on a coil of rope, hiding.

Gradually the tumult died down. The passengers had gone to their quarters. The gangways were being withdrawn. The great ship shook itself and began to churn the water into foam. The gurgling intermittent whisper stopped and then became a hiss. They were moving. Trüdchen sat up and saw the dock lights slide away behind them. It was almost as though the land had been her home. Something inside her was being torn out.

Her teeth chattered. But she wasn't crying. Crying wouldn't ward off the horror that was creeping all around her, closer and closer. She could hear its soft, fluttering footfalls. Its myriad soft, black bodies whisked against her—rats—big rats—baby rats. Why, her father must have been a rat—a huge, horrible creature that did horrible things, until at last someone had stamped on him, too. He had seemed so splendid —she had been so proud of him. Often the thought of his wonderfulness had kept her brave when she had

been cold and hungry. But perhaps rats were like that. Perhaps they were proud of themselves and of each other. They didn't know how everyone hated them or why—they didn't see they were different.

Frau Hildebrandt and the Frau Bäckerin—they seemed like everyone else—ordinary people. But you couldn't tell—you thought you were just ordinary, yourself. But you weren't—everyone else knew. And they said it would have been better if you hadn't been born, so that you wouldn't grow up. They wanted to put their foot on you and crunch the life out of you, they hated you so.

The rats had hated her mother. They had hated her. There wasn't anywhere in the world where you could go—to escape——

She stood up. The ship lurched and flung her heavily against the bulwarks. She could hear the water talking to her underneath. The foam was like a white woman gliding alongside and beckoning. Perhaps her mother——

Her father and mother were dead. They were safe. When you were dead, people didn't worry about you any more. They let you go. She remembered a mouse they had killed in their house once. Her father's *Bursche* had trapped it in the kitchen, and everyone had screamed at the poor thing, trembling and shrinking in its corner, and said: "How disgusting—how filthy!" But when it was dead—all limp and quiet and not afraid any more—they had just picked it up and put it in the dustbin and forgotten it.

It was easy to be dead. Death was just round the corner. There was little Franz Schumacher, her class-

mate, who had thrown himself out of the window because he couldn't do his lessons. His teachers had been so cross and cruel to him. But afterwards they were sorry. They saw how unhappy he had been. They sent wreaths to his funeral.

The small rain had soaked the crêpe hat through and through, so that it hung comically about her ears. It soaked through the thin coat to her little, starving bones. But she didn't know. She didn't even know that she was thinking vast, terrible thoughts about life and death, or that she, Gertrude auf und zu und von Arnstein-Prütwitz, was trying to find a way out from men's hatred of one another.

VII

The crossing from the Hook to Southampton is an all-night affair, and Monsieur Leforges went straight down to his cabin. He was very tired. But before he had taken off his overcoat, he knew that he would not be able to sleep. It had been a wonderful day. But it often happened that after he had been peculiarly successful, he would toss the whole night through. Nerves, of course. It was high time he retired. Only a sense of duty kept him going. The war had deprived men of their youth and their old age, too.

"I shall go for a stroll on deck," he told his secretary, who intruded a sleek head to inquire after his well-being. "The fresh air will quiet me down."

The deck was deserted. The wind swept it with an invisible broom. You could see the water scudding

before it. The ship pitched heavily, and the stern lights rose and fell like the tail of a see-saw. Monsieur Leforges was an old sea-dog. He liked a storm—a fight. But to-night he was too tired. He would have been glad of a little quiet.

He pulled his cap well down, dug his hands into his pockets. He had plenty to occupy his mind—there was the meeting with an English Cabinet Minister to-morrow, and the task of telling that gentleman in the suavest possible manner that he was a sentimentalist and a fool. An amusing, satisfying task well suited to Monsieur Leforges's temper. But instead he thought about his little dead son.

There wasn't anything new in that. He was always thinking about him, but in terms of a glacial, relentless passion. He wore his memory like a hair-shirt that exasperated him to fresh energy. But to-night he thought of him as himself—as the little boy he had known. He wondered what he had looked like before the end. He must have had a small, sunken, white face and round, staring eyes. He must have looked at his captors and tyrants with just that expression of bewilderment and grief—not angry, but with the tragic resignation of childhood. And his captors had rattled their sabres and thought: " Starve and be damned to you, little French swine! "

Monsieur Leforges walked up and down, up and down. He seemed to himself utterly alone on a phantom-ship steaming to an unknown destination. A wonderful day—the culmination of all his ambition. But his heart was tired—dead tired.

What had become of her—of that little girl? How

she had stared at him from her dim corner! He had seen her once since then—standing on the quay, blown about by the wind and the rain like a stray wisp of unregarded life—so utterly forlorn. He had nearly spoken to her. But not quite.

Of course, she hadn't understood a word. It wasn't likely. He had talked fast and angrily. Not a clever child either—half-witted, probably, with those round, unflinching eyes that didn't seem to see him at all. And yet there had been a look of rather awful understanding. Well, what did it matter? He had spoken the truth.

How old was she? She was so stunted looking you couldn't tell. Eight or ten, perhaps. She and Robert might have played together. They might have played the same games with the same toys. Children did—all over the world. There was a sort of understanding between children. Later on, something happened to them.

He stood still, staring down at the black, rolling water. He was more than tired. He was unhappy. He knew now that he was a desperately unhappy man. It seemed to him that his heart lay like an aching stone in his breast. Other people lost their children. They grew resigned. Their memories were golden and lovely. His had turned to poison. They were slowly killing him.

Oh, Robert—little Robert——

Bitter tears came into his eyes. He turned away, ashamed, and walked on. He had passed beyond the shelter of the upper deck and was battling against the full force of the wind when he saw her——

At first, he didn't believe. It was a shadow—an hallucination—a phantom among the phantoms of his brain. But his breath had stopped. Then he knew—knew with a horror of certainty that choked the cry in his throat. He was like a man in a nightmare. It seemed that whole minutes elapsed before he began to run. And then his feet were leaden. They stumbled and slipped. The wind pushed him back with invisible hands. It caught his voice and flung it behind him. All the time he could see her. She was climbing slowly, painfully. She might have been trying to climb over a stile. There was something so simple and innocent about her movements. Only the sea and the wind and the tossing ship were sinister. Now she was standing almost upright—like a small, fantastic figurehead against the flying darkness. She seemed to be looking intently at something far beneath her. Her glasses dropped off—he saw them fall—then her little hands went up, covering her eyes.

He never knew whether she heard him shout. He reached her. He caught the short, dripping skirt. He dragged her back, and she fell against him. A ship's lantern threw its ghostly light into their two faces, as they stared aghast at one another. For that moment they were not man and child, but two equals, considering the whole grief and pitifulness of existence.

Her hands were pressed against his chest. She said, simply, with an odd dignity: "Please—let me go——"

But he held her closer to him. He felt as though he were fighting her. He spoke in German—hardly knowing that he did so.

"Poor little girl—*armes kleines Mädchen*——"

Her arms dropped. Something seemed to break in her. He could almost hear it—like the snapping of a taut wire. The next instant she was clinging to him. The little, terrible hands groped and clutched at him as though they were seeking his very heart. And she cried. He had never dreamed that a child could cry like that. He thought her whole body must be torn asunder. And Monsieur Leforges cried, too. His own heart melted in an answering anguish.

"Don't—don't—there, it's all right now. God forgive us all——"

He sat down on the dripping coil of rope. He drew her close to him under the shelter of his coat. He kissed her. All the German tendernesses he had ever heard of came to his stiff lips. He could feel how she grew quiet—listening. She was like a little bird, warming its half-dead body against his.

"Tell me—why did you—how could you—you poor baby——"

They had forgotten the wind and the rain. They were like two lovers. They clung together. They were quite alone. For a while they were silent, and then very slowly and haltingly Fräulein Gertrude von Arnstein-Prütwitz opened her heart to Monsieur Jules Leforges.

She told him about the rats—the baby rats.

And Monsieur Leforges stared into the darkness and grieved over himself and the whole world.

VIII

Among those who waited on the station platform was a tall, grey-haired man—military in type—who looked as though the Continental train, then curling round the bend, was bringing him no happiness. He, too, was thinking of his dead son, and of Gertrude auf und zu und von Arnstein-Prütwitz. He was hating her. It seemed to him an ironic insult to his grief that he should have to bring into his home a child bearing that name.

But as the great train drew to a standstill, he squared his shoulders. After all, he had made up his mind. It was his duty. He had to go through with it. He wouldn't show what he felt. Anyhow, she would be in the hands of governesses—you couldn't send a child with that name to school—not yet. He himself would go abroad.

There were few passengers. No children. He stood looking about him perplexedly. A square-built foreigner stared at him and then lifted his cap. He spoke in careful English.

" Are you, by any chance, Sir Ambrose Hampden? "

The tall man bowed.

" You are awaiting your grandchild? " the Frenchman persisted.

Sir Ambrose flinched. He had never thought of Gertrude von Arnstein-Prütwitz as a grandchild.

He nodded. " She doesn't seem to be here," he said coldly.

" She is here—in my charge. But first, I want a word with you."

It was all very peremptory and astonishing. But there was something about this Frenchman—something rather desperate, as though the man didn't care what happened so long as he did what he had to do. The two strangers walked up and down the platform. The Frenchman talked rapidly, with a rare but expressive gesture. The English Cabinet Minister was waiting for him. That didn't matter. And then, all at once, both men stood still, facing each other. The Englishman had not so much as lifted a hand. But he had said: " Good God! " and Monsieur Leforges drew a long breath of relief.

" So you see why I had to speak to you first. After all—I have lost my son, too. But if you do not want her—say so. She shall be in his place. I cannot bear any more unhappy children."

Sir Ambrose Hampden blinked his grey lashes.

" Better go and pick her up, hadn't we? " he said.

They found her sleeping in her corner. What had he expected? Some monster of insolent hideousness? He hardly knew. At least, not this little, black, crumpled heap of broken-hearted weariness. Her hat —what was left of it—lay on the seat beside her. Her head drooped. Not beautiful in any way, but with a kind of dignity—the dignity of much sorrow. He bent over her and touched her gently. Her eyes opened. They looked at him short-sightedly, and he saw that they were his daughter's eyes—his son's eyes. His own face broke like a mask. He laid his big hand on her starved one.

" Trüdchen——" he said. " So you've come home at last! "

III

YOUNG NOWHERES

III

YOUNG NOWHERES

I

The joke originated with Mr. Jesse. And, considering its quality and the fact that nobody else in the apartment house appeared to be aware of one's existence, it was surprising how rapidly it spread. Probably Mr. Jesse spread it himself. Mr. Jesse liked jokes. Naturally he liked his own jokes best. Also he was unsnubbably gregarious. And as he owned the swell bachelor apartment on the tenth floor and more than sufficient means, nobody snubbed him.

At the age of fifty Mr. Jesse retained the gaiety and irresponsibility of youth. He loved the world. He saw it as a large, juicy orange, revolving with jovial unsteadiness in the mellow after-glow of a gargantuan " high-ball." Everything was snug, warm, water-tight, though mercifully not quite dry. Its inhabitants were happy brothers. Mr. Jesse loved them all. He even loved Albert, who was not Olympian. Usually Mr. Jesse found it difficult to realize that he even existed. There was something queer about Albert. The other elevator boys were familiar characters. Mr. Jesse exchanged weather prophecies and seasonal sports' information with them. He even got to know something of their family

history, and could make tactful and friendly inquiries. And Albert had the night shift. He came on at seven and went off at seven. And Mr. Jesse was either in too much of a hurry to keep a dinner appointment, or too blurred with the results, to notice him. The superintendent of the building confided to Mr. Jesse that he had doubts as to whether he was even sufficiently respectable, owing to what you might call an inherent shabbiness, which baffled the smartest uniform. On the other hand he was cheap and he was always on the spot. Mr. Jesse agreed negligently to the latter point. When night revellers, Mr. Jesse among them, yawning with weariness and the stale air of theatres and cabarets, rang the bell, he came scudding out of some mysterious corner, huddling himself into a brass-buttoned coat, and stumbling over his own anxious, untidy feet. And without a word, he would snap to the steel gates, turn on the switch and shoot them with smooth accuracy to their destination.

It was queer how he knew where everybody belonged, for he never seemed to look at anyone and, for that matter, his thatch of coarse, reddish hair was about all they saw of him. His habit of carrying his head bent gave him a slinking, skulking appearance. He was like a young rat that had quartered itself somewhere below stairs and was sufficiently useful to escape destruction.

Nobody, except the superintendent, knew where Albert lived, and not even the superintendent knew where he spent his spare time, or where he ate his meals, or who his people were, or whether he had any people. And certainly nobody cared.

But at 12.30 a.m. Mr. Jesse was too fond of humanity to let even Albert escape the vastness of his embrace. He leant against the sides of the elevator, his soft hat at the back of his head, his rather swollen little eyes twinkling with sly merriment.

" Your career, Albert," he said, " is typical of life itself. Life, Albert, con-consists of ups-and-downs." He hiccuped contentedly. " Ups-and-downs," he repeated, ruminating. As he lurched out on to the tenth floor he patted Albert's sloping, narrow shoulders. " Young Ups-and-downs," he chuckled.

That was at 12.30 a.m. But on another occasion, after a party that had died at dawn of sheer, unutterable boredom, Mr. Jesse saw his joke from another angle. The air in the apartment house was stuffy with steam heat and the insidious chill of morning. Mr. Jesse was very miserable. He looked at life through the widening aperture of an oncoming bilious headache. He saw himself as a tiresome old man who was going to die soon, after a period of meaningless activity, and saw the bowed, enigmatic figure at the brass switch as the embodiment of the whole senseless business of human existence.

" Albert," he said, " you go up—and you go down. You do it with an air of purpose and significance. But can you tell me where you really go and where you really come from? "

For the first time in Mr. Jesse's memory Albert looked up at him. And Mr. Jesse saw that Albert was different. The other elevator boys varied from a sophisticated, leering twenty to a sober, rotund forty. But Albert was really young and innocent. The blue

eyes in the freckled face were those of a frightened child.

"I dunno, sir," he said. "Nowheres—as I knows of."

Mr. Jesse sighed. He had a sudden ridiculous desire to cry his heart out on his mother's shoulder. And Mr. Jesse's mother had been dead these forty years.

"Young Nowheres," said Mr. Jesse sadly.

II

As a matter of fact he knew them by their boots. Boots. All sorts of boots. Mr. Jesse's patent Oxfords, stout and twinkling; the debonair pumps and the gold dance shoes of the young married couple on the third, that went out so immaculate and gay, and came back soiled and raffish and rather pathetic, looking as though good times were not as good as advertised; the tarnished slippers of the mysterious, lovely lady on the second-back; Mr. Cleaver's calf lace-ups, thick-soled, black, brutal-looking, and the coloured shoes—never the same twice—that stood timidly beside them. Fortunately they didn't come often. Week-ends mostly. It was understood that Mr. Cleaver had a big house in the country and that the apartment was just a *pied-à-terre*. When he came, the other elevator boys exchanged winks behind his formidable shoulders. They knew all about rich men who kept snug, discreet little *pied-à-terres* in town. But Albert never lifted his eyes above the boots. And the boots frightened

him. He was haunted by the idea that suddenly they might begin to grow and grow, and then there would be no escape from their slow, inevitable advance. They crushed things—these boots. Albert knew it. He could almost hear the bones crunch under their square, insensitive heels. He was thankful when they hurried round the corner to the luxurious, seldom-used apartment.

Once a week the superintendent gave Albert the key and an extra dollar, and he cleaned the place out with a desperate earnestness. (Because, without that dollar, he couldn't have gone to the " movies " on his night off.) He knew every book and picture and ornament. He knew the views from Mr. Cleaver's windows—the towers and minarets and floating palaces of a dream city of unimaginable splendour, glittering in the polished crystalline air of winter, asleep in the shimmer of a blazing summer heat. He would stand for a long time at these windows, broom and duster in hand, lost in a vague, formless wonder.

The dining-room pretended to be Elizabethan. It had low ceilings and dark walls and rich red curtains, framing diamond-paned windows. Beside the open fireplace were logs piled in readiness, and a small refectory table and two deep easy-chairs. Sometimes the logs had been burnt to grey ash. They were still warm when Albert touched them. The table, littered with the remnants of a meal sent up by the French restaurant round the corner, was pushed back and the two chairs were elbow to elbow, pressed close to one another. Albert dreaded to touch them. It was like an intrusion—like breaking in on someone else's

secret. The impress of two personalities, linked together in a spurious yet intense intimacy, was set on the dead, stagnant air.

Across the tiny hall was one other room. The low Regency bed was like a lovely woman lying asleep under her silk coverlet, and the painted chairs and tables were like frail, ineffectual ladies-in-waiting grouped about her. Albert shrank from contact with their scented beauty. And when his work among them was done he scudded away from them with shy, averted eyes—ashamed and frightened—and hungry, too; he did not know for what.

III

Shoes. A pair of black shoes with low heels and bulging a little at the sides. Sober-minded shoes that had an air of wanting to do their duty quietly and inconspicuously, in spite of the fact that what with poor leather and bad workmanship it was none too easy for them. Every morning they stepped eagerly into Albert's elevator. He noticed them because they almost always came on his last journey. They were so punctual. One day when they didn't come he was ridiculously disturbed. He had got to depend on them as on a landmark. He was frightened of things —vague and indefinable things, and quite definable things like being "fired"—and anything regular like Mrs. Ambrose, the scrub-woman, and the exterminator man, who arrived at 6.45 sharp on Thursdays, helped

to reassure him. So that when the shoes hurried past him the next day—evidently rather ashamed of themselves—he was correspondingly relieved.

A very small breathless voice said: "Gee, I was afraid I'd be late again!"

Albert took no notice. People often said things in the elevator—especially on his shift, when they were less reticent and dignified than in the day-time—but they were usually bursts of disgust or weariness and required no answers.

But the small voice persisted.

"Them subways is just awful round about now," it said. "A girl don't get no chance."

Albert was overwhelmed by a sense of complete inadequacy.

"Is that so? Well—I dunno. I don't go on the subways."

"What? Never?"

"Well—not since I was a kid."

"Say—that's great, isn't it? If I didn't have to go on subways no more I'd be lucky. I guess you live here."

Albert snapped open the gates for her at the tenth.

"Sort of."

"I work for Mr. Jesse. I'm cleaner."

"He's a nice gentleman.

"I'll say he is. Well, I'm glad I'm on time, anyway. When I saw you I knew I'd make it. You go off at seven, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Must be kinda funny working when other folks is asleep."

"I guess it ain't funnier than most things—when you get used to it."

"Well, I'll have to be getting along."

The black shoes pattered along the stone corridor. Albert pressed in the switch, and slid down to the basement where the coloured day-boy, resplendent in his uniform, took over the elevator with a grunt.

Afterwards, in bed, it occurred to Albert that he hadn't once looked at her. But she had noticed him. She had noticed that he went off at seven. And she seemed impressed because he lived in this grand house and didn't have to go in subways. And they both knew Mr. Jesse. It was as though something extraordinary had happened.

The next day she said: "Good morning," and Albert said: "Good morning." He saw that the heel of the right-hand shoe was worn down one side, giving the black-stockinged foot an odd appearance of distracted and uncomplaining weariness. But that was all there was to it. And the autumn passed, and the black shoes were repaired and went into rubbers.

Every morning Albert made up his mind that he'd say something—one of those snappy remarks that the other elevator boys could toss off at any moment with a grin and a wink. Sometimes he even fancied that she was timidly waiting for him. But that wasn't likely. And anyhow he hadn't a thing to say.

But one day, when the rubbers came in still white with snow, she sighed. It was a sigh of relief, as though she had been through a hard struggle and had reached home. It was absurd to think of the elevator as home. And yet when Albert slammed the gates he

had an idea that she felt safer. He was so often afraid himself. He knew what it felt like to be shut in—barricaded against you didn't know what.

"Gee—but it's biting cold outside!"

"Is that so?"

"It must be fine—living here. They keep the place good and warm, don't they?"

"Not bad."

"I dunno how they do it."

"If you saw the furnaces you wouldn't wonder."

"Say—they must be big things. I'd like to see 'em."

"Would you?" He felt proud and self-assured for the first time in his life. She wanted to see the furnaces. "Well, there ain't nothing easier." He reversed the switch. "You ain't afraid of the dark, are you?"

"No; I ain't frightened. Except sometimes when I'm alone."

So his being there made a difference. He protected her. He went ahead, down the final flight of stone steps. He knew every inch of the way.

"Gotter mind how you go," he said.

He did not give her his hand, though afterwards it occurred to him that he might have done so. But he was too astonished at what was happening. And it happened so naturally—so casually, almost—as though a friend had dropped in to visit him. Nothing would ever be the same again.

"We're all right now."

He pulled the string of the electric light, and the sickly yellow glow seeped down upon an unmade bed.

But he did not notice it. It never was made. It was all part of the natural scheme of things.

"There they are," he said.

He felt her hand on his arm. It was like the claw of a bird, it was so tense and thin.

"Who sleeps down here?"

"Why, I do. Wait; I'll open 'em up. I call this one 'Jane' and t'other 'Henry.' I'll be raking 'em out in a minute—making 'em ready for the day. Take care! Stand back a bit. It kinda burns you."

He swung open Jane's iron jaws, and a red searing glare illuminated them both. Involuntarily he turned, and for the first time he really saw her. But she wasn't even looking at the furnace. Her head was turned sharply towards the white bed under the light. She held her thin black coat tight about her neck, as though she were still cold. She was frightened. In the small pinched young face her eyes were big and dark with horror.

"Gee—it must be awful—sleeping down here alone!"

The furnace and the air grew colourless and lifeless again. He was disappointed that they hadn't impressed her more.

"One gets kinda used to it," he said.

"Well, you get home sometimes?"

"No; I ain't got nowhere."

"But your folks——"

"Nor folks either. Not that I know of. I wish I had."

"Don't you go wishing things on yourself," she said with sudden hardness. "I had folks once."

There were heavy steps on the stairs. Somebody blundered against a piece of furniture and cursed bitterly.

"Hi, Albert! You, there! What the hell do you think you're doing? Can't you hear? The tenth floor's ringing its head off. If it's that there Mrs. Ambrose——"

The superintendent saw Albert's companion. And his jaw dropped. He had a narrow, hard-bitten face, and a trick of showing his teeth like a fox-terrier.

"What the hell——" he said again. His eyes wandered. They came naturally to where the light showed brightest, and they narrowed and grew bright and ugly with amusement. "Say—if that doesn't beat everything! You young devil! I've a good mind to break your neck for you. Get out of here! And you, too, my girl—you'd better mind your step!"

They slunk into the elevator. Silently they slid upwards. In Albert something queer and unfamiliar was stirring—a sense of outrage, of having been violated somewhere where violation cannot be endured. He wanted to cry—he wanted to kill someone.

He felt her cowering away from him, and he said chokingly: "I oughter have knocked his block off."

"It ain't no use getting mad. Somebody's always bawling you out, anyway." As she passed she hesitated, but they could not look at one another. "I didn't ought to have asked about them furnaces. If I've got you in wrong I won't forgive myself."

"It ain't nothing," Albert said valiantly. "It was you I minded about—him speaking like that to you."

"What people say don't matter—so long as it ain't true."

"It's fine of you to feel that way——"

"Listen. I—I didn't want to see the furnaces—not really—just wanted to talk to somebody——"

"You don't mean that—honest?"

"Yes—cross my heart! You seemed sort of friendly. I'm awful ashamed. You'll think I'm the fresh sort——"

The bell on Mrs. Ambrose's floor seemed to have gone mad. Albert wanted terribly to say something. He couldn't bear that she should believe he could think horribly of her. But he was slow. He was even rather stupid. For that reason he would be likely to be elevator boy on the night shift all his life. If he wasn't fired first! And, anyway, the habit of a thousand and one nights was too strong for him.

The steel gate clanged. And the elevator shot up in search of the enraged Mrs. Ambrose. She was stout and elderly and very easily enraged. She told Albert what she thought of him. But he didn't mind. For it was true. Somebody was always "bawling somebody out," anyway.

IV

After that they didn't even say "good morning." They were ashamed. But most of all they were frightened. Every time the superintendent came into the elevator Albert cringed a little. He could feel the small sharp eyes measuring him ironically. But he

knew better than anyone that he wasn't good for much. If they fired him he wouldn't have a chance.

He would be dragged back into that quagmire of odd jobs from which he had freed himself with such steady patience. He knew that he was on the verge.

But it had been worth it. He had something of his own to remember and to elaborate with dreams. When he turned out the light over his bed the darkness was less threatening. A friend had walked with him in it. She had been frightened, too—by the same things. And that gave him courage. It was up to him to be strong and courageous for them both.

One bleak March morning she failed him. It seemed that she had failed Mr. Jesse completely. Mr. Jesse, in a silk, padded dressing-gown, his thin, fair hair on end, came out of his apartment and talked to Albert about it through the steel lattice-work of Albert's elevator.

"And what the blazes am *I* to do?" he demanded piteously.

Albert stared back. He was unconscious of staring. He had no idea that his freckled, insignificant face expressed something so sharply poignant that Mr. Jesse forgot that he would either have to boil his eggs or go without.

"Well, what's the matter? Not going to drop down dead, are you?"

"No—sir."

"Don't do it. There's trouble enough. Send the superintendent up to me. He may know of someone——"

"Pneumonia—sir?"

"That's what they telephoned. Taken her to the hospital. What's her name, anyway? Mary. Mary Something. Very annoying—very annoying. Well, don't stand there like a waxwork!"

Albert slid down in search of the superintendent. The superintendent shrugged his shoulders. Oh, hell! These tenants! Still, he guessed he'd have to do something. Albert went on down into the basement. He felt as though he were going to be sick. His knees shook under him.

Mary. Mary Something — Something — Not-very-important. She had talked as though she were quite alone. And some strangers had taken her to the hospital. What did it feel like to be in a hospital—among crowds of people—and quite alone? What was pneumonia? Did it hurt much? Involuntarily he put his hand to his own narrow chest. He imagined a knife running through him with every breath. But he didn't know. He didn't know anything. Not even her name. Nor where they had taken her. He couldn't do a thing. Gosh, dreams were just a bunk! His bluff had been called all right. When it came down to brass tacks he couldn't even be a friend.

He crept into bed. He cried as a child can cry, very quietly, terribly, with an unreasoned, fathomless despair.

He asked no questions. He didn't dare. And one spring day she came back. The black shoes hurried into the elevator. They, at any rate, were no better for their long rest. So to speak, they were on their last legs.

Half-way up to the tenth Albert brought the

elevator to a standstill. He didn't care what happened to him. He turned to her. And he saw that she was reckless, too. She had never been big. Now she was just a handful. Her brown eyes seemed all that was left of her.

"You been awful sick, ain't you? Mr. Jesse told me."

"Yes. I got my feet wet. I was sort of low, anyway. And standing in them subways comes hard on you."

"You don't look any too good now."

"I'm fine. And Mr. Jesse kept my job for me."

He wanted to say: "It's been lonesome without you." But he didn't. And there was someone ringing on the eleventh.

"I guess he missed you, anyway."

"I dunno. He's kind. Sent me flowers and candies."

"Is that so? Well, ain't that fine?"

They flew up to the tenth.

"Well, I'm glad you're O.K. again," he mumbled.

Mr. Jesse came in very early the next morning. He was tired, disgusted and full of an almost venomous dislike for Mr. Jesse. Accordingly it would have surprised him to know that at least Albert, the elevator boy, worshipped him.

V

Mr. Cleaver stood looking out of his window. From a certain angle he could see the Park trees, which were already losing the ephemeral brightness

of a New York spring and were growing dark and heavy. In a week, Mr. Cleaver thought, New York would be impossible.

Mr. Cleaver turned from the window. The apartment, too, in the bright glare of the sun, had a tarnished look like that of a raffish painted woman in a country lane. It would have to be redecorated. Meantime he would shut it up until next winter.

Well, it was a good investment. Here he had been able to relax—spread himself—drop all the frills that his position as an honourable and successful citizen imposed on him. And, frankly, Sarah, though she carried his diamonds as though born to them, was a bit heavy-going. Damn dull, if you told the truth.

A whole summer of her. Well, maybe business would call him to Paris for a week or two. Maybe.

Mr. Cleaver smiled.

VI

Heat wave. Something for the papers to make into headlines. One hundred in the shade yesterday. People gasping on the fire-escapes. People crowding into the open spaces and struggling dully for seats, where they bunched themselves in acquiescent, blank-eyed misery that might at any moment explode into blind rage.

The apartment house was almost empty. Even Mr. Jesse, who hated change—and the country worst of all—was going. In the country you couldn't

escape yourself. And Mr. Jesse's whole life was spent in trying to get away from Mr. Jesse.

He told Mary. And she gave him her address, which sounded quite impossible, and he patted her on the shoulder.

"You're a good girl. I'll let you know as soon as I come back. Have a real vacation."

So that was that. Too bad that, in the interval when people didn't want you, you should have to go on living. It ought to be possible for you to be packed away in a box and unpacked again when they needed you.

Albert stood on the steps of the apartment house, and when he saw her face he said nothing, but walked beside her down the shady side of the street. They walked very slowly, their feet like lead. But somehow they were free. It was as though the people who frightened them had gone away and no one cared what became of them.

"Ain't this your sleeping time?"

"I couldn't sleep no more. We gotter keep one of them furnaces going for the water. Down there's like hell!"

"I ain't coming—not after this."

"Mr. Jesse—he ain't gone and fired you?"

"No. But he's going away—like the rest of them."

"Aw! That's bad. What'll you do?"

"I guess I'll find something. Get a bit of laundry work. One don't need so much in the summer."

"No—that's a fact."

" Let's walk in the Park a bit. Maybe it'll seem cooler."

" I went in the Park once. But by yourself it's sort of lonesome."

" Ain't you got a girl? "

" What—me? No, I ain't got no girl. Got to have money for girls. Anyways—I wouldn't have a chance. I ain't their sort."

" Why ain't you? "

" Donno. Just got no style, I guess. I'm kinda scared of things—people."

She said in a low voice: " That's me, too! "

" Is it true you ain't got no folks, either? "

" Sure—I got folks. But I ran away. My Ma used to beat me up reg'lar."

" Poor kid! "

She smiled at him timidly.

" Kid yourself! "

In the Park all the benches out of the glare of the sun were taken. It didn't seem much cooler either. The burnt-up grass and trees made one's throat hurt. On a knoll one tree, stronger than the rest, threw out a broad, friendly shade, and instinctively they turned towards it. They clambered up and sat down close to one another, looking towards the high, blazing cliffs of the city. The distant traffic made a dull, monotonous roar, flecked by the vixenish screams of a police whistle. But around them was a drowsy silence.

" Seems as though we was all by ourselves, don't it? "

" Tastes sort of good to be alone, when you ain't quite alone, don't it? "

" I'll say so."

" I often wanted to talk to you, Mary."

" I used to wonder. You was so quiet-like. I didn't even know you knew my name."

" Mr. Jesse told me."

" I know your name! Albert."

" Sort of silly sounding, ain't it? Mr. Jesse calls me ' Young Nowheres.' "

" Mr. Jesse's a one for jokes! "

" My mother used to call me ' Binky.' "

" Ain't that cute—Binky! "

" I guess I was a queer-looking kid——"

" And you ain't got a mother no more? "

" She died when I was twelve. I've been on my own since I quit school."

" Well, mothers ain't all they write about."

" I guess not. But I sort of like to think mine——"

The whistle sounded almost in their ears. There was something familiar about it—like someone of whom you were frightened shouting at you in your sleep. Even before you were awake, you knew. They looked about them, timidly. A large policeman was lumbering up the hill towards them.

" Hi—you there! What the hell you think you're doing? Don't you see the notice? 'Keep off.' Well, that's what it means—' keep off! ' Get off! "

They rose patiently.

" Sure, Cap'en. We're sorry."

He glowered at them, red-faced, swollen-eyed.

Bawled out! The gritty path hurt their sore feet. The sacred grass. Who was it for, anyway? Dogs on leashes, muzzled, their tongues lolling. Whistles

shrilling at everyone who had the nerve to think they could do as they liked. Keep off! Get out!

He turned and looked at her. His indefinite blue eyes had a new glint in them—a hard, indignant brightness.

" Say—I gotta couple of bucks. They're letting them stay out on the beach at Coney. It's my night off. Let's go."

" What? You and me? I donno——"

" There ain't no harm. We gotter go somewhere. I ain't slep' these three days."

She slipped her hand into his.

" Sure; I'll come along with you—Binky."

VII

The red-faced man threatened them. He shook his fists. He glowered ferociously.

" This yere show ain't like none o' them fakes. It's gen-oo-wine. It's edoocational. You gotter *be* edoocated. If you ain't edoocated you ain't nothing——"

They drifted on. The air was heavy with the smell of distraught, exhausted humanity. Bands blared. Drums banged. From the switch-tracks came the hot, menacing roar of metal. It was as though the heat had a great, brazen voice. It hurt your ears. You felt as though the inside of your head were red-hot—sending out rays of red through your eyes.

" Ain't going to faint, are you, Mary? "

" No—just my feet—sort of sore——"

" Guess we can sit down somewhere."

But there wasn't anywhere. Not unless you paid. And even when you'd bought a drink, fingering your " nickels " nervously, there were people waiting for your bench at the soda counter, desperate-looking people, with their hats at the back of their heads and the sweat running down their cheeks.

It was wonderful, all the same. Even though you felt sick and dizzy—you weren't alone any more. They smiled shyly at one another. Not much to look at—either of them. Even the soda-fountain man gave them a once-over of ironic sympathy. He knew their sort. Pavement-bred. Pasty-faced. Undersized. Never amount to much, anyway. But with their eyes shining at one another.

He bought a nickel's worth of peanuts. They drifted out on to the beach. Even there it wasn't easy to find room. People lay sprawled out in strange, uncouth attitudes, like black rags of wreckage tossed up by the sea. You could hear their whispering. You stepped over them shyly, wondering at their obliviousness.

There was an open space near the edge of the sea. They sat down with their arms about their knees, looking out over the glittering, undulating surface of the water. That way there was nobody in the world but themselves. A faint freshness fanned their faces. Albert could feel her soft arm pressed gently against his. He wanted to stay like that, motionless—for ever.

" Fine, ain't it? "

" I never thought anything could be so won'erful, Binky. Look at that there moon. Like as though she were smiling at us."

" Maybe she is. Maybe she likes seeing how happy we is."

" Are you happy, Binky? "

" Sure I am. I used to think nothing like this'd ever happen to me. Only in the movies. I—I've dreamed about it."

" Seems like fate—our meeting."

" That's how I feel. Something big."

" I guess that's what they mean—people being made for each other."

" I kinda feel I've known you all along. When you was took sick I nearly died."

" I'd be in bed thinking about you. I hoped you'd know why I didn't come. At seven o'clock I used to think : ' Now he's going off.' When I was nutty with the fever I'd call you. They teased me about it afterwards."

" Gee, is that so? Ain't that won'erful? And me not knowing——"

" Binky—ain't you ever cared for anyone like this? "

" Never. I've never had no one. Only my mother. She was fine. Honest to God she was, Mary! "

" I guess she must have been. I didn't mean that about mothers. I was out of luck with mine. That's all."

The sea seemed to draw a deep breath and stir like a monster on the verge of waking. A sigh, scarcely audible yet so tremendous that it might have come from a whole world, rose from the densely-crowded shore. She put her arm about him. There was contrition in the gesture. She was sorry she had said that about mothers. She drew his head down upon her thin breast.

" Rest a bit, Binky."

" Ain't I tiring you? "

" Sure you ain't. I like it. I never had no one."

They slept, her dark head resting on his fair one. They were so young, so tired. They could have slept anywhere. But presently she awoke sharply, conscious of cold, moist hands clutching at her feet. The sea rising. So that was why they had been left alone. Above the line of the tide the sleepers lay densely packed.

She shook him pityingly.

" Got to be moving on, Sweety."

He woke with clenched fists—that new anger stirring in him. Moving on! Always someone moving you on. He scrambled up and walked stiffly behind her. His limbs ached. His head throbbed. But she was there. She was there. She was beautiful—more like a goddess than even Pola Negri. And they belonged to one another.

VIII

They'd save. That was the idea. No more going to the movies. Besides, movies were tame stuff, anyway. What did Valentino, or any one of them, know about love? What did they know about sitting on a Park bench—quite quiet—just holding hands and saying nothing? What did they know of the sweet, terrible excitement of waiting at the subway exit for Mary to come up, wonderful as Aphrodite rising from the foam? (Not that Albert had heard of Aphrodite.)

They'd saved twenty-five dollars. Then on Albert's

night off it rained. They stood together on the verge of the subway, jostled by the impatient crowds, and looking helplessly at one another. It was queer how afraid they were. They were like migratory birds with clipped wings, who feel the first breath of winter ruffling their feathers.

" What'll us do, honey? "

" Just walk around. I ain't afraid of the rain."

" Might go to a show."

" Oh, no." It was as though he'd laid sacrilegious hands on her holy of holies. " You can't get in nowhere under fifty cents. Why, it's all I saved last week."

So they walked round. And the rain became a deluge. It soaked through their miserable clothes. It squelched out of their shoes. Albert could feel his soles dragging in the wet as though they might soak off. He looked at her through the slanting grey lines. Her hat hung limp about her ears. He saw the thinness of her coat.

" Honey—you gotter go home and get dry. I'll have you sick again——"

" But it's our night——" Her voice was broken with weariness and disappointment.

" I know. It's a darn shame. But we've had such luck. Things got to go wrong once in a while. See you for a minute to-morrow, kid."

" All right, Binky. Just as you say. I gotter a bit of a cold coming, and that's the truth."

So he took her back to the subway. They held hands desperately. It seemed as though they couldn't bear it. The shy good night kiss under the trees, for

which they lived, was lost for a whole week. They couldn't kiss there in the crowd. A whole week. Seven days and nights.

" Well—so long, Binky! "

" So long, Kid! "

The apartment house had come to life again. The young married couple and Mr. Jesse resumed their mighty quest after some vague, unattainable good. Only the lovely, mysterious lady on the second floor had not come back. There were rumours. And Mr. Cleaver was still abroad. The decorators had been into his apartment, and the walls and coverings shone with a staring, expectant freshness.

Everybody full of their own affairs, bracing themselves for the plunge into the maelstrom of a full season. Real life beginning again after the make-believes of summer vacations. Nobody realizing what it meant that the museums closed at five.

There came a night when he spoke with a sudden roughness—brutally—with a sort of rage.

" We can't go on. It ain't living. It ain't human —sitting like this—like a couple of strays. We gotter find somewheres we can just kiss each other. You ain't kissed me, Mary—not these three weeks. You don't even kiss me like you did—in that there doorway——"

" I hate it, Binky. It makes me kinda ashamed— after that night the cop caught us——"

" He hadn't got no right. Don't people kiss each other? Just 'cause we've got no place——" He broke off, scarlet to the roots of his fair hair. " That there room-mate of yours—is she always round?

Couldn't you give her the tip—as, maybe—we'd like——? "

The words choked in his throat. They looked at each other, pitiably afraid, as though a storm had burst over them and they couldn't keep their feet. Then she put her hand on his arm, steadying them both.

" We couldn't do that, Binky. Other folks, maybe. Not us. We're too poor. We got so little. We'd—we'd sort of snatch at things—we couldn't help ourselves——"

" Mary—sure! I didn't mean nothing. Only just somewheres as we could talk—like as we was at home."

She began to cry helplessly.

" Mary—honey—don't you now! What have I done? I didn't mean nothing—honest to goodness——"

" Aw, Binky, it ain't nothing you've done. Just to sit quiet at home—by a bit of fire, maybe—and cook our supper—peaceful-like—just you and me—just once——"

He said nothing for a long time. He seemed to be thinking. The fair brows over the insignificant nose were knit in deep furrows. Then he stood up.

" We gotter have it. That's sure. It ain't an awful lot to ask, is it? "

" Binky, we gotter wait——"

" Sure, we gotter wait. We're only kids. But we gotter live whilst we're waiting—ain't we? "

" Don't you do nothing reckless——"

" I ain't reckless. I ain't the hold-up sort." He gave a queer sound like a laugh torn by a sob. " But I gotter kiss you, Mary, just once in a great while—ain't I? "

IX

She said: " What is it, Binky? " For she could see at once that he was different. He looked older—more resolute. His eyes were very bright and the wind had whipped up the colour in the thin cheeks. For the first time she saw him as a man and not as a sad little boy who had lost his mother.

" You ain't got to ask questions, Mary. I knows how it is. Most times it's you looking after me. Now I'm going to look after you. Awful cold and tired, ain't you? "

" A bit. Binky, I got an idea. We might ride in the subway—all the way to Brooklyn and back—for a dime. It's fine and warm down there—better than the Library——"

" Aw, you think that's a great idea, don't you? You don't have to have no ideas—not to-night. Just take my arm."

The snow danced between them. There was a bitter wind that made their clothes feel like paper. She cowered against him, and the roughness of his coat on her cheek made the weak tears come into her eyes. It was true. She was so beaten with weariness she could hardly stand.

" Where're we going, Binky? "

" Where'd you like to be going? "

" Aw, don't ask that. It ain't kind."

" It serves you right for asking questions when I tell you not."

" Binky, you ain't gone and spent money? "

"Yep—that's just what I have done. A whole buck——"

"What did you spend it on?"

"Ain't I told you not to ask? Ain't you the limit?" He gave a high-pitched, excited laugh. "I donno as I'd be wise, marrying such a doggone, obstinate woman."

It thrilled them both—just to be talking about it. And the way he said it—so grown-up and independent—like a real husband with a real honest-to-goodness job, who could afford to make jokes. And yet his arm quivered under her hand.

"Binky—I'm scared——"

"You ain't got to be." There was a hard edge to his voice. "We're through with being scared—both of us—to-night, anyway. You gotter trust me."

She said humbly, gladly: "I do, Binky, sure I do——"

The apartment hall was empty. They slipped past the closed door of the elevator to the stairs. He put his arm strongly about her.

"It's ten flights, Mary. Just you take it easy."

She was passive now. She had promised and she wanted to be. She wanted to give everything into his hands. She was so tired. He was her man now and would make everything come right somehow. On every flight they rested a moment, her head against his shoulder. He held her protectively. But he did not kiss her. He was like someone too absorbed in the seriousness of his task for immediate tenderness. From beneath the air of manly resolve a boyish excitement peered through wistfully.

" We're just there. Now you gotter close your eyes. And don't you open them till I tell you——"

She was glad to do that, too. Her eyes hurt. Her heart seemed to be beating all over her body. She let him lead her. She heard the soft opening of a door. She was aware of a richer warmth—of subdued lights —of a sudden loving glow upon his face. Her fingers were locked in his.

" Mary! "

She began to see. A great fireplace—logs burning —two chairs drawn up—the curtains drawn against the world.

" Binky——! "

He saw the terror in her face. He pleaded urgently.

" Mary—it's all right—sure it is! Don't spoil nothing. It's only once—just once. We gotta right to sit down somewheres. It ain't hurting no one, is it? "

" But we ain't got no right here——"

" Mr. Cleaver's away. He don't want it. He won't never know. I'll do double work to pay him. I knew how you'd feel. And I—I've paid for everything—the logs, Mary—and the bit of supper."

She was so tired. He made her sit down. With gentle resolution he took off her rubbers and hung her wet coat before the fire. An immense gravity clothed him. He was like a young priest performing the sacred rites for the first time. She watched him, awestruck. He was really beautiful now—strong and young and brave.

" It's this way, Mary. It's only make-believe—sort of—but we gotter have it once—just see it—and —feel it—so's we could keep on going——"

She knew what he meant—how in weariness and loneliness you lost hope. You couldn't see things any more. You couldn't even believe they'd mean so much to you. It was as though something were dying in you for want of warmth and food.

He took her hand and led her into the kitchen. Everything was in readiness. Two lamb chops lay side by side on their grease-paper. Potatoes waited to be peeled. A slab of pie.

"I nearly bought stuff at the *delicatessen*—but I thought maybe you'd—you'd like to pretend—as we'd come home and you was cooking supper——"

Suddenly she awoke. Weariness slipped from her. She grew calm and resolute. She pushed him gently.

"See here—you get out of this. You ain't no use at all—you great clumsy good-for-nothing——"

He stared at her. They began to laugh helplessly, like children. But after that one gust of young laughter they became sternly matter of fact. It made it seem more real. It gave them the feeling of something prosaic and ordinary and stable. They didn't even kiss each other. It was an hour snatched from that future when to be together would be a lovely commonplace—when he would come home and hang his hat in their little hall and call out: "Hullo, Mary!" and she would call back to him out of the kitchen: "Hullo, Binky! You take them there rubbers of yours off."

They spoke softly to one another. They ate decorously, like guests at a great feast. Sitting before the fire with the empty plates piled up on the side, they talked of the little doings of the day as though

they were symbols of their inarticulate thoughts. Mary, growing bolder, shook her head over Mr. Cleaver's possessions.

"They're fine. I guess they cost no end. But I wouldn't want them in our place, Binky. I'd like real homey things—like us."

"Sure," he said.

He couldn't take his eyes off her. The fire-light was on her face. Her fragile girlishness had taken on a tender, dreaming gravity that made him think of a picture he had seen—on Sunday—in one of those galleries where they had taken refuge. Just a girl with her hands folded in her lap and a sort of angel kneeling in front of her.

It hadn't meant much to him at the time. But now, suddenly, he saw and understood an overwhelming beauty—too great for words—too great for him to bear. It broke the heart. It sent him stumbling across to her. He knelt with his face hidden in her lap. And she put her hand on his head and the tears ran down her cheeks.

X

It was nothing. Just a key turning gently in a lock. But it was the end of that world into which they had escaped. Danger bore down upon them—the old terrors, only magnified beyond imagination. He sprang up—manhood, loverhood stripped from him—already cringing—beaten.

Footsteps coming down the passage. The black

boots. They grew bigger and bigger. There was something greedy about them. They hungered to feel your bones crunch under their thick soles.

Albert took her by the arm. He thrust her silently into the dark room behind him, and closed the door and set his back against it. The sweat ran down the insignificant, white face. He looked, as Mr. Cleaver afterwards described him, like a rat caught in a trap.

Mr. Cleaver was a big man. Also he had a revolver in his hip-pocket and he was not in the least afraid. But he was angry—savagely angry. It was a rage that couldn't be explained even by his passion for the rights of property, and the flagrant wrong that had been done them. Rather it was as though a secret exasperation had been run to earth. Mr. Cleaver had always been successful. But, contrary to appearance, he was not always at ease. Behind each success, whether in the market or in his numerous adventures, there had lurked an impish demoniac voice of irony and derision. It was not usually wise to deride Mr. Cleaver. He had a way with mockers. But against the voice he had been helpless. It had had an elusive, glittering quality. Now it seemed to Mr. Cleaver that he had its embodiment in his hands—here in this miserable skulking boy, whose eyes were fixed on his with an hypnotic terror. He had run his tormentor to earth, and now, by heaven, he would crush the mockery out of him!

He whipped out his revolver.

"Hands up—you!"

Albert put up his hands. The sleeves of his coat were too short for him and showed the thin white

wrists. His attitude against the painted door was grotesque, but it had a quality of suggestion that for some obscure reason Mr. Cleaver did not care to contemplate. He ordered him roughly out into the middle of the room. He ran his strong, coarse hands over the thin body. Albert quivered. There was the old sense of violation—the shame that made one want to die. But one couldn't even die when one wanted to——

There was nothing. Only a "quarter," which Mr. Cleaver tossed contemptuously upon the table.

"Done this often, eh?"

"No, Mr. Cleaver—I swear I ain't!"

"You can do your swearing elsewhere. How often have you used this apartment for your convenience?"

"Just this once, Mr. Cleaver—just——"

"Don't lie. I hate lies. You don't make things any better for yourself. Come across now. What have you taken?"

"Taken? Why, I ain't taken nothing——"

"Damn you! Stop that whining! Just came here to sit by the fire, I suppose?"

"Yes, Mr. Cleaver—that was how it was——"

Mr. Cleaver laughed. Rapidly, expertly he flung open drawer after drawer. He seemed to have eyes everywhere. When Albert's exhausted arms slipped to his side, Mr. Cleaver swung on him with an oath.

"Keep 'em up, you young thug!"

The fact that nothing had been touched sharpened his anger. He looked about him, baffled and unsatisfied, and his eyes came to rest on the remnants of their supper. He stared frowningly; then

he laughed again—this time at his own obtuseness. With a heavy, deadly certainty he strode to the closed door and pulled it open.

"Won't you join us, young woman?"

He was delighted—furiously delighted. Of course. A place of assignation. How convenient for them. Driven from the cellars, they had come here—to his apartment. His immaculate apartment. These two ill-fed, ill-clothed, unlovely scallywags. The girl not even pretty. Gee! He'd make them sweat for their indecency. Yet, catching a glimpse of their faces, his anger momentarily lost its impetus. They were looking at each other. Mute and hopeless. But it was as though they had forgotten him. Somewhere at the bottom of their bewildered minds seemed to be the idea that he could do nothing. They were laughing at him. Ah, well, he'd show them!

"You whelp!"

He snatched the receiver from the telephone. He was trembling from head to foot of his great bulk.

"Hullo—hullo there! Give me the superintendent. Hullo; is that you, Ambrose? Yes, Mr. Cleaver speaking. Send me up a couple of cops at once. It's that precious elevator boy of yours—caught him red-handed—he and his——"

Albert sprang. He struck wildly, treating the great, imperious body with whirling fists.

"You liar! You leave her out of this, do you hear?"

And Mr. Cleaver deliberately, with a slow-moving, sensuous relief, struck back—once—with the whole strength of his great arm.

Then it was quiet. A storm that had blown a small fire to a great flame had passed. Albert lay where he had fallen. The girl had thrown herself down beside him, and was holding his white face against her breast and crooning to him. He looked up at her speechlessly, the blood trickling from his open mouth.

Mr. Cleaver turned away.

He said roughly with an odd incoherence as though he, too, were suddenly bewildered: "Get out! I don't want women——"

"Binky—I won't—I'll stand by——"

"You do as he says, Mary. You quit. You don't do no good staying. It was my fault——"

Mr. Cleaver would not look at them. But he heard her go. He heard the boy drag himself slowly up. He felt him waiting motionless and patient. There were heavy footsteps in the corridor outside. Mr. Cleaver strode to the door and pulled it open.

"Sure; I've got him safe, officer."

XI

He had read about it in the papers. He had wondered what it felt like. Now he knew. You were quite alone. You weren't like other human beings any more. You were set apart. And people looked curiously at you as though you were some sort of animal, interesting, amusing, even pitiable; but entirely different. And they pushed you about and you were helpless. You couldn't do a thing.

The Law. Rights of Property. The Sacred Rights.

Yes—he understood all that. He had done wrong and now they were going to punish him for it. That was fair enough. But there were other rights—other wrongs. He couldn't have spoken of them. He didn't really know what they were. They lay formless and inarticulate at the bottom of his tired mind. But he knew that he wasn't good for much—never would be—and that was the great offence.

When they pushed him up into the box at the Judge's left hand, he said: " Yes, your Honour; no, your Honour," in a flat, dead voice. He couldn't have told them how it had really been. If he had said: " We have to have somewheres to be alone and quiet," they'd have sniggered. If he had tried to explain about that obscure exasperation which had so suddenly exploded—how in the fire-light he had seen himself as something different—not the cowering failure, but as a man with dignities—and how these dignities had been violated—they'd have laughed louder. Or they'd get angry. They'd take it out of him.

And yet the man in the black robe spoke not unkindly. Once, indeed, when Albert looked up, their eyes met, and just for a moment it was as though two travellers on a strange and lonely journey greeted each other.

" So you paid for the food and fuel with your own money? "

" Yes, your Honour."

" It was just that you wanted to show off a bit to your girl friend? "

" No, your Honour—no, your Honour—not that."

Words. Words that he couldn't find. The Judge

sighed, fingering his papers. Albert looked over the Court. He saw Mr. Cleaver, large and inflexible, the embodiment of the Power against which he had offended. He would not look at Albert. His face was set with insulted righteousness.

Albert couldn't think any more. He only saw pictures—all sorts of pictures. He saw the towers and minarets and palaces as he had seen them from Mr. Cleaver's window. He saw the moon rising over the water, and the maple tree under which they had sat in the summer's evenings. And the fire-light on Mary's face. All sorts of useless pictures.

There was Mr. Jesse—Mr. Jesse looking very peculiar —as though he had been crying—but resolute, too, as though for the first time in his life he knew why Mr. Jesse had been born. He was talking earnestly to the Judge, who bent towards him with attentive deference.

"In the future, your Honour, I shall make myself responsible—these two poor infants——"

"I'm glad to hear it, sir."

Suspended sentence. A buzz of voices. For a moment he, Albert, had been held up for everyone to look at. Now they brushed him aside. It was someone else's turn. He saw Mr. Jesse nodding at him with a sort of crooked-mouth assurance.

It was Mr. Jesse who had asked: "Where do you really come from and where do you really go, Albert?" And he didn't know. Less than ever. He wasn't even going to prison, or back into what seemed now the safety of the dark basement. Just nowhere in particular. Bawled out—jostled from one job to another—one resting-place to another—because there

wasn't any place for anyone who wasn't good for anything.

Even the cop didn't want him. The cop pushed him gently but a little emphatically.

" Now then, get a move on! Don't want to live here, do you? "

Then he saw her. She had pushed right forward to the barrier that divided them. The shabby hat was askew, the pinched face was still white with fear. But she was fine. She looked like some small bird, battered by the storm, but full of dauntless gallantry. And she called out to him, not caring that people looked at her, and smiled.

" It's a'right, Binky—you're coming home—we're waiting for you—me and everything—always——"

Then he knew. Not everything. But enough to live by. Just the one thing that mattered. He knew why people stuck it and why, even when they weren't good for much, they still had dignity. The fire burning on their hearth—their faithfulness.

That was it.

Their faithfulness.

And he went out to meet her with his narrow shoulders thrown back and his head up.

IV

THE OLD PEOPLE

IV

THE OLD PEOPLE

I

Trumpets. Even Andreas Hofner, who was very deaf, heard them. It was less a sound than a sudden burst of sunlight in the grey winter stillness. The trumpets were blown vigorously, but rather unevenly, as though the trumpeters were running, and the faint unsteadiness gave the long blast a thrilling, passionate quality like the break in a human voice. Old Andreas heard it quite distinctly. He looked up from the wooden shield he was carving, absently dusting away some of the delicate shavings that had gathered under his hand, and took off his spectacles as though to listen better.

"Soldiers——" he said aloud.

He stood motionless. In the kitchen next his workshop Maria, his wife, was clattering busily. He could not hear her but he knew she was there, and he knew that she would be clattering, because it was nearly time for the midday meal. And in the old days, when his hearing had been keen as a hunter's, he had often smiled to himself, listening to her and thinking how she loved the crisp, clean clatter of her shining copper.

"Maria!" he called, in his deep, grumbling voice.

But she paid no attention, and he went slowly with the heaviness of great strength that has begun to fail, to the inner door. He opened it, and the pleasant fragrance that greeted him was like a sound too. It made the fading blue eyes under the thick white brows twinkle. For a moment he forgot what he had wanted to say to her.

"*Älterchen*—there is something here that smells good."

"You may well say so," his wife shouted back cheerfully. "Leberwurst and Spezzel—that's what it is——"

"Is it a feast day, then?" Andreas asked, looking doubtful.

"Maybe it is. There are so many people on the streets you would think so. Look at them now."

She pointed a twisted, energetic old finger at the window under the smoke-blackened beams. And sure enough the townspeople were moving past in a slow stream. They did not look in, as they usually did when they had time to spare. Their faces were grave and anxious, and when Maria Hofner tapped at the panes even Johann Kirsch, who was the Bürgermeister and Andreas's oldest friend, only nodded hastily and hurried on.

"Perhaps someone has died," Maria reflected. "But I don't know who it could be. It is true that Gottfried Baum has had the fever for this last week——"

"If it had been Gottfried Baum," Andreas interrupted severely, "I should have been the first to know. The relatives would have sent for me at once. Who

else should make his coffin for him? Didn't he always say: ' There is no one who can handle wood like Andreas? ' "

" It is true—of course," Maria murmured soothingly. He could not hear her, but he had learnt to read her lips, and he nodded.

" It was Gottfried who spoke up for me in the Council. He said: ' No one has a greater claim than Andreas. Andreas lost five sons. And he is the greatest craftsman in Windstättl. He will carve us the finest memorial in the whole of the Empire.' "

" They say there isn't an Empire any more," Maria broke in. " I don't understand what they mean, but they say there is no Emperor."

" People chatter a lot of nonsense," Andreas retorted sternly. " What do the people here know about politics? They hear rumours and they make up fairy-tales. If they worked harder they would have more sense."

He stood watching her, his hand twisted in the short, curly white beard that made him look like one of the shepherds that he had carved into the altar-piece for the Parish Church. These fits of dreaming had grown more frequent of late. Whilst he worked at the memorial he dreamed—so vividly that once or twice he had looked up and called a name—each time it had been Fritzchen, because Fritzchen had been his favourite —and had waited with a thickly beating heart for a door to open. And it took time for him to remember that he was an old man, and that Fritzchen and Albert and Kurt and Hans and even Baby Andreas were all dead.

Maria bustled about. She was the very opposite of her husband. When she had been a girl she had been called the fairy of Windstättl because of her slender figure and tiny hands and feet, and at their marriage the town-wits had made jokes about her and Andreas, who could have crushed her with one hand. (As a matter of fact he was very gentle, and had never hurt anyone in his life.) But all that had changed. The five sons had come and the war had taken them away, and pretty Maria Hofner had become an old misshapen woman, with a bent back and twisted feet that had lost their spring, and a shrivelled, hard-bitten little face. But she had plenty of life left. All her movements were quick. She was like a little old sparrow hopping about the dim kitchen.

" Listen! " Andreas commanded.

Maria stopped with the lid of a saucepan in her hand. Yes, there it was again. She had heard it the first time. Trumpets. Only this time they sounded nearer, and had a harsh, exultant note that hurt the ears.

" Soldiers! "

" There are no soldiers," Maria protested. " All the soldiers have gone away. Perhaps it is the Schutzverein making an outing. What day of the year is it, Andreas? "

Andreas Hofner looked at the gaudy calendar that hung by the door. He tore off the forgotten leaves with his thick, strong fingers.

" St. Hubert's Day," he told her.

Maria clucked her satisfaction.

" There, then! Of course it's the Schutzverein. He's their patron saint. But why they should make

such a noise about it, or why anybody should bother about them goodness knows."

Andreas went back to his work. Very soon the winter's light would begin to fail, and there was still the lettering to be finished. He had three days left, but his hand had lost something of its steadiness and he had to go slowly. One slip and the work of months might be spoilt. Andreas took the edges of the shield in his hands and bent over it, brooding on each strong, delicate line that for him represented a thought. He had never been outside Windstättl, but he knew in his heart that this was a noble thing that he had made—finer than the altar-piece, finer even than the Christ that from the top of the Pass watched over the little town. In a small space Andreas had carved the majesty of the mountains, and at their feet slept a dead Austrian soldier. His face was lifted to the sun that rose just behind the topmost peak of the Königsberg, and even in miniature the peace of its expression was a thing for wonder and pity. Anyone who had known Fritz Hofner would have recognized him.

Fritz and Albert and Kurt and Hans and Baby Andreas lay in the crowded military cemetery under the shadow of the Königsberg, on whose bitter heights they had fought and died. The place was forlorn and neglected because the people were too poor even to bring wreaths, and it was Andreas who had cut the simple white crosses and carved in the name and the regimental number of the dead heroes. But this was to be their true memorial. On Sunday he would nail it with his own hands to the Rathaus amidst the solemn prayers of the people. So long as the Rathaus stood,

Fritz and Albert and Kurt and Hans and Baby Andreas would never be forgotten.

Maria came in and stood beside him. A quietness settled about them both so that they no longer heard the trumpets nor the rush of feet. They were alone together. Maria pointed her stiff old finger.

"*Für's Vaterland*," she read aloud. "Ei, that's got a grand sound to it, *Älterchen*, and only one more letter left to do."

He nodded gravely.

"It will be finished. I have worked night and day that it should be finished."

"Ei, but everyone will be pleased when they see it. There isn't another town in Austria that'll have such a memorial. It'll put heart into everyone. When they go past it people will lift their heads again."

"No one has lost so much," Andreas said. He said it proudly. Pride had been the only thing that had upheld him. When Fritzchen went—he was the last, swept away with a hundred comrades in an avalanche—the Emperor himself had telegraphed. Everyone in Windstättl had seen the telegram. Such a thing had never happened. And from thence onwards Andreas and Maria, with their five dead sons, had been set apart.

"There is to be a band," Maria went on, "and the fire brigade from Eulensee is sending a deputation in uniform, and the bishop is to give the benediction from the Rathaus window. Oh, if they could only see it—the five *Buberle*—they would be proud too."

Someone was rattling desperately at the door. Whoever it was was so frightened that he didn't realize the door wasn't locked. Maria opened it impatiently,

A storm of noise seemed to rush past. There was Elsa, Kurt's young wife, leaning against the jamb, wide-eyed and panting, her shawl clutched about her and her face grown old.

" Elsa—*in Gottes Namen*—what has happened? "

" Haven't you heard, *Mutterle*? It's the Italians—the Italian soldiers—they've come over the pass—they're coming now—hundreds of them."

She almost screamed, so that her voice sounded like one of the trumpets. The room was full of tumult. It was as though a tidal wave had burst in through the open door and was swirling against the walls, destroying, devastating.

But Andreas held himself steady. He made a proud, sweeping gesture.

" It's not true," he said. " You're crazy, Elsa, my girl. The war is over. The Italians never came over the Königsberg. We saw to that. Our five sons——"

Even as he spoke the Bersaglieri swept past the window. They came at their historic trot, their plumed hats, at a gallant angle, flowing in the grey winter's wind, their dark, intent faces alight, their trumpets shouting.

Andreas Hofner strode to the door.

" I tell you the war is over," he said sternly. " It is a mistake. They have no right——"

He was thrust back. The trumpets caught his protest on their hard, shining points of sound and tossed it aside. And Elsa, Kurt's wife, who was with child, broke into bitter, terrified weeping.

II

The General Beppo Volpi rode with his aide-de-camp down the mountain pass, and talked comfortably of old times. The winter's sun had gone down behind the mountains, and the winding road, still torn by the passage of heavy military traffic, was steeped in cold grey shadow. But the peaks of the Königsberg blazed. The General, wrapped in his wide cloak, pointed at them. Though he was an old man he had good eyesight, and, besides, he knew what he could not see.

" That was my dug-out," he said. " There—on the left where the peak is forked. Twice we lost it, and twice we won it back. The last time it came to a hand-to-hand struggle and the place was like a charnel-house, so full of dead you could hardly move. And the cold—I shall never forget the cold—never, never. Sometimes I felt like a dead man myself—my limbs wouldn't move. These mountains which look so beautiful to you, my dear Strozzi, and over which the tourists will soon be swarming, picking up souvenirs, became to us demons, semi-human, monstrous torturers. We cursed them, for every foothold cost us blood and agony. But we held on. If it hadn't been for the Peace we'd have taken this little rats' nest at the point of the bayonet."

" Doubtless," the aide-de-camp murmured politely. " The Peace came too soon. We could have taught them a lesson."

" We shall teach it them yet," the General said, smiling under his grey moustache.

The two men fell silent. The aide-de-camp was thinking of Rome whence he came, and which would be enjoying its first festivities since the war. It was hard luck. The prospect of spending the next months in this miserable village made him feel more than ever cold and discouraged. But the General was remembering his youth.

"You Romans don't understand," he said presently, as though he had guessed his companion's thoughts. "I was born in Sedena—Kleinstadt they called it—in Italia Irredenta. We were Italians—every man of us—and we dared not even speak our own tongue. They had their heels on our necks, and there was nothing for it but to set our teeth and wait. No—you couldn't possibly understand what it means to me."

He was a very handsome old man—very upright, with the fine, aquiline features of his race. But the aide-de-camp, glancing shyly at him, thought involuntarily of the peaks that were now cold and grey as corpses. There was something death-like in the implacable figure riding beside him. All very well to play avenger and conqueror, but as for the young aide-de-camp he would rather have danced at the Quirinal. He glanced up, however, courteously following his superior's eyes. Though he had been in the war himself, it was hard to believe that men had actually lived and fought on these sinister and threatening heights.

In the shadow of the mountains, but far back from the road, they passed a walled-in space. In the centre was a huge, roughly-built cross, and at its feet, nestling

like sheep at the feet of a shepherd, were hundreds of little crosses. Very ghost-like they looked in the shrouding twilight. The big cross had not been planted strongly enough to withstand the winter's storms, and was bowed to one side in an attitude of sorrowful and protecting tenderness.

"Yes," the General murmured. "We made them pay all right. There were more than that though. Once a whole company was swept away by an avalanche and was never found. It was like an act of God."

A chill wind, pregnant with snow, blew down the pass, and the General's cloak spread out about him like black wings. His companion shivered. It looked very lonely up there in the neglected cemetery—lonely and bitterly cold. He could not help imagining the place at night with the snow heaped high over the dead. He had to remind himself that anyhow the dead are alone and cold.

Lanterns glimmered ahead of them. They moved hither and thither as though they were afraid, and were trying to gain courage from one another. As the two men rode up one of the lanterns advanced alone. It was lifted, showing a man's stern, anxious face. He stood at the General's knee, and tried to speak firmly and with dignity. But his lips quivered.

"*Euer Exzellenz.* I am the Bürgermeister of Windstättl, and in the name of the citizens I protest——"

The General touched his horse with his spurs so that the startled animal bounded to one side, and the man with the lantern had to scramble into safety. The General spoke loudly so that everyone could hear.

His voice was so hard and metallic that it seemed to rise to the very tops of the black and silently witnessing mountains.

" The name of this town is Falzaro. You are Italian citizens." He bent down from his saddle: " And you, sir, are no longer Bürgermeister."

He rode on. He carried himself magnificently, as though behind him marched a regiment of his dead comrades. But on the lighted outskirts of the town he looked back.

" They shot my father," he remarked casually. " You understand—he would not speak their language——"

And then he laughed—the aide-de-camp would have supposed at some light, perhaps rather improper story, had he not seen the old man's face.

III

They sat together at the long oak table, and though the sentry at the door seemed to take no notice of them, they spoke in undertones. There was the ex-Bürgermeister Johann Kirsch, his brother Georg, the Herr Doktor Menzel who was very old and kept forgetting what they had come about, and five of the chief tradesmen in Windstättl. Once upon a time they had been prosperous men, and had carried their heads high and spoken their minds with robust voices. Now they whispered and kept their eyes down as though they were afraid of what they might see, or as though they were secretly, tragically ashamed.

The Council Room of the old Rathaus was as familiar to them as their own homes. On winter evenings they had sat under the noble, age-blackened beams, shrouding themselves in thick tobacco smoke, and arguing comfortably about the town's affairs, whilst the mediæval paintings of saints and horribly tortured martyrs looked down on them with a complacent serenity.

But the room had grown cold. It had a dank, melancholy atmosphere as though someone had died, and lay in invisible state. It smelt of death. The sentry, silent and immobile, might have been on guard at the door of a mortuary. From time to time the eight men glanced at him wonderingly. It was like a dream. Even the noises below in the street had a nightmarish, unfamiliar quality. At any moment they might wake up, blink their eyes and clap the embossed lids of their beer-mugs with a great sigh of relief.

" *Herr je*—I must have dozed off. I had a devilish queer dream too. I'll tell you what it was—*Aber zuerst—noch eins, meine Herren!* "

And they would fill up and lift their mugs with a jovial " *Prosit, Älterchen!* " whilst the smoke would sink in a kindly veil about them, blotting out that sinister, incredible figure.

Gottfried Keller, the baker, sat back, throwing out his chest and speaking in a loud, uncertain voice.

" Na—he certainly doesn't mind keeping us waiting. But Italians are like that. Unpunctual—no system. I remember one time——"

" Take care! " his neighbour whispered. " Take care, can't you? "

The sentry glanced around.

" Speak Italian," he ordered curtly, " or hold your tongues."

They held their tongues for a while, making odd, self-conscious grimaces like scolded children. Then they began to whisper again, watching the door out of the corners of their eyes.

" Of course, it can't be true," the old Bürgermeister muttered. " What right have they? Even savages commemorate their dead. Still, one doesn't want to make trouble——"

The door opened. The sentry saluted smartly. The deputation lumbered to their feet. General Beppo Volpi glanced from one to the other of them with a cold, military keenness, that was without feeling or human curiosity. Compared to their peasant bluntness he was like a fine rapier. As he came up to the table he tossed his cloak back, showing the array of ribbons on his breast.

" Well——? " he queried. " Well, gentlemen? "

They stammered. Each one of them made a little deprecatory sound so that it was like a subdued hum. The ex-Bürgermeister began in German and then broke off and started again in rough Italian.

" If you please, it is like this. On Sunday we are to put up a memorial to our dead heroes. It had been arranged before you "—he made a vague gesture like someone who has been mortally wounded and does not yet know what has happened to him—" before your Excellency—in fact, before we knew of these changes —of what they had done to us up there. It was to have been a great celebration—a religious celebration,

you understand. Our master craftsman has carved a shield which is to hang outside the Rathaus——"

"The Palazzo Municipalo," General Volpi corrected, throwing down his thick, military gloves.

"Ah, yes—of course," the Bürgermeister ducked his head in docile acknowledgment. "A deputation is being sent from all the surrounding villages, and the bishop is to pronounce his blessing from the Rathaus—from the Palazzo—window."

"I have already notified the bishop that the ceremony will not take place."

They looked at one another. Then it was true. The Bürgermeister began again. He was trying to speak firmly yet quietly, as he had done two nights before on the road. But the military figure, standing at the head of the table, locked in an attitude of static impatience, made him tremble.

"*Eccellénza*—that is what we have heard. But we could not believe it. I would not have taken any notice—but I was afraid—I did not want any misunderstanding. After all, authority is authority. I, as Bürgermeister, understand that——"

The soldier glanced at him—one sharp, ironical glance, and the speaker faltered: "I mean—I understand—my time of office—— I did not want any conflict. I wished to work with you to keep the peace. Since nothing can help us we wish to do our best. That is why we have come so that the matter should be clear——"

"It is clear."

The Bürgermeister's mouth opened. It stayed open and began to tremble oddly like that of a child on the

verge of tears. But the Herr Doktor Menzel nodded and rubbed his hands as though he were congratulating everybody on a satisfactory case. He was very old and hadn't heard clearly.

" You see," he chirped. " You see—I told you so. What an unnecessary fuss. In these days we are all civilized, decent people. I told you it would be all right."

They tried to silence him, tugging him by the sleeve and whispering in his ear. They knew they ought not to have brought him, but he had been on the council for years and had done no harm. Therefore it had seemed cruel to leave him out. Besides, he was a gentleman—a university man—not a rough peasant like themselves, and the General would surely be impressed. But the General measured him with a restrained contempt.

" Perhaps it is time you people understood your position once and for all. By the Treaty you have become subject to the Italian Government. Your suggestion that you should celebrate your resistance to our arms is therefore a piece of insolence that you would be wise not to repeat——"

" *Eccellénza*——"

The soldier brought his fist crashing on the table.

" My father was shot by your people for less," he said. " Now you can go."

They shuffled their feet. They wanted to go. They were terrified—they hardly knew at what. Something about this iron old man broke them, so that if he had lifted his fist, resting clenched and hard as a block of

stone on the table, they would have winced. But the Bürgermeister held his ground desperately.

" *Eccellénza*—it is our dead we honour."

" Ah, yes, the men who killed our men—my men up there on the Königsberg—my son, for that matter. Excellent. Evidently you have a sense of humour. Now get out of here. You have had my answer. I am in full authority for the time being and you are under martial law. You know what that means——"

" *Si—si, Eccellénza*——"

They ducked obsequiously. But the Bürgermeister had grown suddenly quite calm. It was as though he had come out of terrifying doubt and darkness into some place where he was not afraid, because he knew that nothing mattered any more.

" Forgive me, *Eccellénza*. I don't think you understand. Our sons died for their Fatherland as yours did. It seems they were beaten, but they did their best. They gave all they had. There are no young men left in Windstättl, *Eccellénza*—only us old people. I do not speak of my own sons—I will not speak of myself at all. I think perhaps it is of no great consequence what you and I decide or what happens to us two. In a very few years the dust will be over everything. But there are those in this town who will feel your order, *Eccellénza*, as though it slew their children a second time. I am thinking of old Andreas Hofner and his wife. *Eccellénza*—all their boys went—five in one year. We thought at first they would lose their minds. If they had not felt that their boys had died gloriously, their hearts would surely have broken. Even now they don't understand and we dare not tell them. For a

whole year Andreas has worked at his shield. It is a fine thing, *Eccellénza*—even you would say so—a thing to touch the heart. He is a great craftsman, our Andreas. He carved the crucifix that stands at the head of the Pass. Your Excellency must have seen it——"

The General motioned to the sentry.

"Get these men out."

"*Eccellénza*—they are very old, sad people. I dare not tell them. Think, General—five sons—in one year—even the Emperor telegraphed. It is only a little thing to allow them—a wooden shield——"

The sentry came with his rifle crossed and began to push them along, hustling them with an emotionless insistence. They went like frightened sheep scrambling for the exit to their pen. But the Bürgermeister stood quietly at his place, his head bent meditatively, and when the sentry touched him he made a stern gesture so that the man involuntarily fell back from him. At the door he turned and bowed to the General, and the General Beppo Volpi, yielding to an instinct stronger than his purpose, touched his cap.

Outside the deputation huddled together. It was very cold. An icy wind raced down the mediæval little street. But it was not the wind that made their teeth chatter. They were unmanned and ashamed. They did not dare speak or look at one another.

It was market day. The street was full of peasants interlaced with Carabinieri parading two and two like solemn twin dolls, and smart Italian officers with their caps at a rakish, victorious angle. Amidst so much movement and colour the deputation had a forlorn,

grey look, like a group of prisoners who have been thrust out into the world and no longer know where to turn. It was Gottfried Keller who spoke at last.

" We must tell them. You will have to tell them, Herr Bürgermeister."

" I am not Bürgermeister any more, Herr Keller. And I will not tell them."

" Who will, then? "

" God knows, I cannot." He clenched his hands. " Let them find out for themselves what men are made of," he added bitterly.

The Herr Doktor Menzel plucked at his sleeve.

" Gentlemen, I will tell them. Who has more right to such a task? Didn't I bring their five sons into the world? "

" Yes, that is true. Let the Herr Doktor tell them."

They sighed their relief. No doubt it was true that he was a little mad, the Herr Doktor, but he was kind and had skilful hands. He would break Andreas Hofner's heart and the heart of Maria his wife very, very gently.

IV

He had forgotten.

He knew that he had forgotten. For two whole days he had known, and now he stood at the door of Andreas Hofner's house, plucking his lips with trembling fingers and making little moaning sounds under his breath like someone in torment. It was terrible. He remembered how eager he had been.

He had pushed himself forward, determined to show them all that he still counted for something, and they had trusted him, and for an hour or so he had gone about with his head up. Then a kind of drowsy mist had settled on his brain and he had forgotten.

Of course he should have gone frankly to Johann Kirsch and told the truth. But he was too ashamed. Once upon a time he had been the cleverest man in Windstättl, when people had looked up to him and asked his advice. Now they shook their heads and said: "He forgets—poor old fellow—he forgets everything." And he could not bear it. He would rather have died than have gone to them and said: "It is true. I have forgotten."

Everything seemed to combine to trouble him. The Sunday morning was so still—so very strangely still. It was as though everyone had deserted him. Except for the inevitable Carabinieri, who paraded slowly backwards and forwards, looking about them with puzzled, doubtful eyes, the streets were empty. The windows of the houses had kept their shutters closed. There was an air of desolate mourning, as though the little town covered its face with its hands and wept.

The Herr Doktor did not understand. Perhaps it was the threat of storm that kept the people hidden. Certainly there was a queer grey light over the Königsberg, whose final peak stood up like a finger against the livid sky. Yes, there was snow coming. But the people of Windstättl were not afraid of snow. He shook his head and rapped timidly. Perhaps when he saw the Hofners everything would come back.

Maria Hofner opened the door to him. At first he

was so astonished that he couldn't speak. Why, she had been married in that dress. Queer that he should remember so vividly something that belonged to forty years back, and couldn't remember what people had said to him only two days ago. But there it was—he remembered every detail. The light embroidered bodice and full flowered skirt, the close-fitting beaded head-dress, such as the Windstättl women had worn in the Herr Doktor's youth, were more familiar to him than his own shrunken hands. But they made her unfamiliarly gnarled and small and twisted. The dress was so new—as though it had been laid out on the bride's bed only yesterday—and she was so old. For one grisly moment the Herr Doktor thought that the whole of his life had been a dream and that, at the touch of some evil magic, Andreas Hofner's pretty wife had withered in her bridal clothes.

He became more confused. He could see that her bright, bird-like eyes were peeping past him anxiously —right down the street, seeking for someone.

" Na, na, Herr Doktor, it wasn't you we expected. But never mind. Come inside, and the others will be along presently."

" Presently—presently——" the Herr Doktor murmured.

He followed her into the living-room. There, too, something had happened—something solemn and touching. The room had been cluttered with life—with the turmoil and struggle of hard-won existence—the birth of children, their tears, their laughter, farewells, unspoken anxiety, crushing grief and stoic silences. Sometimes it had seemed to the old Doktor

that he could see the ghosts of all the room had witnessed—that the very walls had been impregnated with voices and unheard sighing.

But now the place was empty, swept and garnished as for the coming of some great event. The copper pots and pans gleamed on the walls. The oak table, drawn up in the corner under the crucifix, gleamed like a dark, empty mirror. The clock ticked solemnly. Life had been put away. It was like a church, austere and hushed——

And set against the wall, facing the door, as if in welcome, was the carved shield of the Windstättl Memorial.

Ah, yes, the memorial. The Herr Doktor remembered now—dimly. Of course. They were to hang the shield to-day on the wall of the Rathaus. They had been on a deputation to the Italian General about it and the Italian General had said—what had he said? The Herr Doktor groaned secretly. It was as though a gust of wind had blown to the door of his mind, and though he might fling himself against it pitifully it would not yield. He had to stand outside, shivering and helpless.

But it couldn't go on. He had to say something. He could see how puzzled they were. The old woman was watching him with her head a little on one side, and he imagined that there was a look on her wizened face, as though she knew the thing he couldn't remember and was afraid. And Andreas himself was watching—waiting for the solemn, tremendous thing to happen.

The Herr Doktor remembered him as a slim, hand-

some young man, but he had grown stout and heavy, and the Tyrolean wedding dress didn't fit him any more. He might have been comic—an old man masquerading—but there was an earnest, touching dignity about him. The Herr Doktor had to turn away. He felt dazed and sick with his uncomprehending pity.

"Well, well, that's fine—that's fine," he stammered. "A grand piece of work. Yes, indeed—you must be very proud, Andreas."

"Are they coming—the others?" Andreas asked. "They were to have been here by now. I was getting anxious. I thought: 'Suppose there should have been some mistake. Suppose those Italian scoundrels——' Why—why do you look like that, Herr Doktor?"

"It is nothing—nothing at all," the Herr Doktor declared cheerfully. Somebody behind the closed door had whispered to him—but so faintly he couldn't hear. He went across to the carved shield and ran his shaking hand over its polished surface. "Yes—most beautiful—most touching—as the Herr Bürgermeister said—a thing to move the hardest heart——"

"Did he say that?"

"Indeed he did—perhaps—perhaps in a moment I shall remember something more——"

"Ei—Kirsch is a good fellow," Andreas Hofner murmured. He stood in an attitude of perplexity, his hand clenched in his thick grey hair. "But why does he keep us waiting. The bishop is to give the blessing in half an hour. They are cutting it pretty fine, those fellows. And how quiet everything is. No one in the streets. I thought——" He glanced about

him confusedly, as though for a moment he doubted the reality even of his own surroundings. "I had thought, somehow——"

His wife shuffled over to him. She slipped her withered arm through his and fixed the Herr Doktor with her strange, penetrating look that seemed to say: "Take care—take great care what you do to him."

"Perhaps they sent the Herr Doktor with a message," she suggested. "Perhaps all the people are waiting outside the Rathaus. Is that what you were to tell us, Herr Doktor?"

He nodded eagerly. He felt grateful to her. She couldn't open the door, but she could make him see what was perhaps beyond it. And somehow old Andreas frightened him. He had the tense, strained look of someone balanced on the edge of a precipice, who daren't look down for fear of what he shall see.

"That's it—that's it exactly. The streets are so crowded—to tell you the truth I was all confused—I am not so young any more—I had to fight my way through——"

"And the band—is there a band playing?"

"All the time—all the time—the band from Eulensee—fine fellows they are—playing for all their worth——"

"Do you hear them, Maria?"

"Yes—yes—— Now I can just hear them——"

She and the old doctor listened to the silence.

Andreas Hofner sighed. His glance wandered to the clock ticking solemnly among the shadows.

"We should be going," he said restlessly. "I don't understand. They were to have come for me.

Four men from the Schutzverein were to have carried the shield——"

"Perhaps if the Herr Doktor could remember his message——" she insisted. "Perhaps he was sent to fetch us——" She said distinctly under her breath: "Tell me. What is it? What is the matter? Why don't they come?"

But he could only stare back helplessly. How could he say to her: "I have forgotten?" And perhaps it was true. Perhaps he had come to fetch them. If only it had not been for that rising, breathless pity in him, as though someone behind the closed door of his mind knew and wept.

"Yes—that's just it. I was to fetch you. At the last moment things had to be changed. It was the Italian General—he said—things had to be changed. I can't explain now. But we ought to go." He drew out his watch. For two days, in his misery, he had forgotten to wind it, and he stared at its dead face with unseeing eyes. "Yes, yes, Andreas, we ought to go."

The old man sighed again.

"I had thought it would be different," he said wistfully.

He picked up the shield and set it heavily, sadly on his shoulders. "Open the door, Maria."

The Herr Doktor went out behind them. The street was full of a grey, penetrating cold. Yes, snow was coming. He felt his knees giving way under him. Something was going to happen—something quite terrible. These two old people were walking straight to meet it, and he ought to stop them. But

if he said: "Don't go," he would have to explain that he was a poor old man who had lost his wits. And he couldn't bear it. The tears came into his eyes and he rubbed them back with his knuckles.

It was pitiable to be so old.

"The windows are all closed," Andreas Hofner said. "And there are no flags. Why are there no flags, Herr Doktor?"

But he was so accustomed not to hear that he did not notice that he did not answer. Presently he asked again: "Can you hear the bands now, Maria?"

"Yes—yes, indeed. They are growing louder, Andreas." But she fell back, plucking at the doctor's sleeve. "What has happened—in the name of God—what is happening?"

He had to reassure her.

"Nothing—nothing—I give you my word——" But it was of no good. He felt how his face lost its composure and broke up like the face of an unhappy child. He turned away from her. "I don't know—I tell you I don't know."

Andreas Hofner's house lay on the outskirts of the town, and they made their way through the narrow twisting alleys towards the *Kaiserstrasse* which was now the *Corso Emmanuèle*. A wind was rising and came down from the mountains in short, cruel gusts that nearly carried them off their feet.

"Winter and death," the Herr Doktor thought. "Winter and death." He couldn't think of anything else. Everything was old and dying—old Andreas there bowed under his shield, and his little wife trotting at his heels—like a pathetic procession of things past

and half forgotten. Even the two Carabinieri stopped to look after them, as though they too saw how queer and tragic they were—these three old people blown along by the wind——

But the street was empty.

A group of soldiers loitered in the archway of the Rathaus. They had been chattering with one another, but as they saw Andreas Hofner and his escort they fell silent and watched curiously. And as Andreas saw them he stopped short and set down his shield and looked about him. He saw the emptiness and the silence, and his face, flushed with exertion, went ashen.

He said briefly, sternly: "You have been lying to me. Everybody has been lying to me——"

"Andreas——"

He shook her off. He said loudly to the listening soldiers: "I have come to set up the memorial to our dead heroes."

He advanced upon them, carrying his shield in front of him like a menacing old warrior. A little under-officer came out of the archway. He smiled good-humouredly, showing his strong white teeth, and gave an order, and three of the soldiers advanced and took the shield out of Andreas Hofner's hands. For a moment he seemed dazed, incapable of resistance. Perhaps he thought that after all they were to help him. Then he understood. With a shout of rage and anguish he fell upon them. But it was scarcely a struggle. He was old and there were so many. They actually laughed. Then it was all over. The street that for one moment had seemed on the verge of a violent, terrible awakening sank back into its

frozen stupor. The eyes of the narrow, steep-roofed houses closed tighter, as though they would not see Andreas Hofner lying on the cobbles with his bleeding face on his wife's old breast.

V

They had let the stove go out. The stove was the heart of the house, and now it was dead and they didn't even know. They didn't feel the bitter cold. They sat at the bare table, stern and sorrowful, like people who have been invited to a feast and have been made mock of.

Andreas Hofner held his head up and stared sightlessly into the shadows, and his wife watched him. Her hands were folded in her lap in an attitude of stoic patience, as though she were waiting for him to come to the end of his thoughts. She was so still. Life had carved so many lines into her shrunken face that it had become as expressionless as a death-mask. But her old eyes glowed. They stared out from their deep hollows like indefatigable sentries from a ruined watch-tower.

The Bürgermeister looked from one to the other of them. From the moment he had come in no one had spoken. Maria Hofner had opened the door to him without greeting, and had gone back to her place as though to resume some grave act of contemplation. More than ever the place was like a church—but a church that has been desecrated and despoiled.

It was so cold that the Bürgermeister did not even turn down the collar of his coat. He stood there,

looming huge and misshapen against the pale lamplight, and seemed afraid to speak. The wind had gone down, and outside, and within the house was a muffled, deathly silence. Every movement—the creak of some old board, the stiff rustle of the Bürgermeister's leather coat as he put his hand in his pocket, had the quality of some portentous footstep.

"That is all I have left," he said. He laid something metallic on the table. "They would have taken it from me if they had known, but I had a fancy to keep it. I meant to take it with me where I am going, but it may be that you will know what to do. They have set your shield in the council chamber, Andreas, and in the summer the tourists will pay their lire to have a look at it. There are things one cannot bear. So I am going away. That is all I have to give you, my old friend."

He waited a moment. Though he could not have heard it, the metal click of the key on the bare table had seemed to run through the old man like a shock of electricity. Then he fell back into his former sightless brooding. But the black eyes of Maria, his wife, fastened themselves on the Bürgermeister's gift. She did not move. It was queer how fiercely alive and vital she seemed, sitting there in her utter immobility.

The Bürgermeister did not even give them his hand.

"*Gott segne Euch*," he said. Opening the door, he stood for a moment looking back at them as though he were impressing some bitter memory on his mind. Then he was gone. A gust of wind swirled round the room and buffeted the untended lamp, whose flame, struggling pitifully for life, flickered and went out.

But the darkness had a luminous quality of its own. It seeped through the uncurtained window in a pale grey tide.

Presently Maria Hofner leaned forward. She laid her hand over the key and fondled it and pressed it against her breast. She seemed to commune with it. She took it with her to the window and held it out into the strange, uncertain light.

Then she called—very softly and insistently, as though she were afraid of waking him too suddenly: "Andreas—Andreas——"

He came at once, heavily, like someone hypnotized, and stood beside her. From the window they looked straight across empty fields to the mountains and the cemetery and their dead sons. They could see nothing, and yet they waited as though at any moment they might see everything. A few flakes of snow that were advance guards of the coming storm fluttered down from the vague and shifting clouds. Slowly, dramatically the moon rode into space, and for one intense minute they saw the Königsberg, white and terribly magnified, blazing amidst a crown of stars.

Then moon and stars went out. The living peaks became ghosts. It was dark again. Andreas Hofner turned away.

"Light the lamp," he ordered.

She obeyed. Though she was so bent, and her fingers were twisted and swollen, she could be very nimble. The light flickered back to life, warming the bitter air with its sickly flame. Their shadows rose up behind the two old people, and ran up and down the walls and ceiling in sly, grotesque mimicry. Andreas

Hofner took his great-coat from a cupboard and a coil of rope. He drew his fur cap down over his ears, and the giant behind him lifted his hands too as though in benediction.

"Give me the lantern."

She was wrapping herself in her shawls.

"I am coming with you, Andreas."

"You cannot. You do not know where I am going."

"I know. And I am very strong. I can help. I can carry the lantern. They were mine too, Andreas."

He stared at her fixedly. She was close to him, and suddenly he put out his arm and drew her roughly against his breast. It was the first movement of tenderness he had made for many years. Even when Fritzchen had gone he had only patted her shoulder. Their life had been so hard. And there was something terrible, devastating, in that breakdown of their stoicism. They did not know what to do. They did not know how to kiss each other. Their dry lips fumbled against each other's cheeks. They clasped each other with stiff, frantic arms. They began to cry, but they did not know how to cry. Their harsh, uneven sobs seemed to tear them and the darkened room to pieces. All the sorrow that had been locked up in silence through the years had burst through the narrow breach of that first gesture. It seemed as though they could never stop—never let go. Only little by little, like a dying storm, they grew quiet, drawing away from one another back into their stern, customary loneliness.

He patted her gently.

"*Na—na, Älterchen*——"

They did not speak again. Across the sleeping silence of the town they heard the Rathaus clock strike. Involuntarily they stood still, counting the hours. Then Andreas Hofner turned out the light. She held open the door for him and followed him.

VI

It had not been a pleasant evening. From some indefinable cause a cloud had hung over the dinner—a sort of sombre ill-temper, a dissatisfaction that had nearly ended in a quarrel. If it had not been for young Strozzi, who was a model of tactful persuasiveness, something really unfortunate might have happened. Oddly enough the General himself had been unable to intervene. He had felt the storm gathering and had let go his customary iron hold over the younger men and gone with the tide. Not that he had made a sign. But within himself he had been a seething cauldron of anger, irritability, sheer inexplicable unhappiness.

They had been celebrating the battle by which the regiment had finally regained the heights of the Königsberg—a dramatic celebration. It did not often fall to the luck of men to commemorate a victory months afterwards under the very shadow of a height which they had won at such cost. The General himself had lost his son that night, and when they stood drinking to the memory of their dead, they turned to him, standing stiff and inflexible at the head of the table, and drank to him.

They had drunk too much perhaps. Or perhaps already they had begun to chafe at the monotony of their garrison life. Windstättl, that had once seemed so great a prize, had dwindled to a sad little town, full of sad people who looked at you with uncomprehending hostility.

At any rate it was Gabriel Vinzenzo, a scatter-brained lieutenant, who had said suddenly and loudly, so that everyone had to hear him: "They say that old fellow lost five sons up there——"

Everyone knew of whom he spoke. The officers' mess was held in the inn facing the Rathaus, and most of the men present had witnessed the scene from the windows. It had been a good joke at the time. Some of them had been outraged at the insolent attempt, but the majority had laughed. What a ridiculous spectacle they had made—the three shabby little old people with their trumpery wooden shield—trying to defy the whole Italian army. But now no one laughed. A heated argument started . . . or rather it was no argument, for everyone but young Vinzenzo said the same thing, but so passionately that men who were in agreement felt a sudden overwhelming dislike of one another. And Vinzenzo had been intolerably drunk.

He had said over and over again, stuttering and stammering: "Well—why—why shouldn't they have their d-d-amned memorial? They're dead, aren't they? I'd have hung it up with my own hands."

Strozzi had led this younger comrade away in the nick of time.

But after that the celebration went to pieces. And

now the General stood alone on the steps of the Gasthaus and gave himself over to a bitter anger. He had wanted to have Vinzenzo arrested. It had only been because of the scandal—because, too, Vinzenzo had been his son's friend and had been with him when he died, that he had held back the order. But to-morrow he would take disciplinary measures. He would make Vinzenzo smart for his folly—for the evening's wretched *débâcle*. Vinzenzo had insulted the dead. He had thrown a question at their glory—at their rights as victors. It was as though, in his drunkenness, he had seen no difference between one dead man and another. If things like that were tolerated in the very stronghold of national honour the crumbling of the whole splendid edifice was foredoomed.

He would make an example—a stern, salutary example.

The resolution left him unappeased. He was restless—acutely, strangely unhappy. He was not subject to emotion. When they had brought him the news of his son's death he had only nodded and gone on giving his orders. Men died, and the lucky ones died fighting for a victorious cause. There had been nothing to regret. This impatience—this disquiet that he felt now was just a mood—passing, insignificant. It might mean that he was not so young any more and that he was tired. It might mean that he had drunk too much himself, so that his mind had lost its normal serenity. It might mean, too, that there was something in all this talk of an after-life, and that to-night dead men were marching through the streets—battalions of them, silent, spectral hosts, blowing their voiceless

bugles, streaming to meet other dead men—*his* dead—up there on the frozen heights, and to enact again that last culminating struggle.

He gibed ironically at his own fancifulness. Yet he could not quite shake himself free from it. The street itself would not let him. It was empty and silent. Yet there was something happening. The ancient houses, their steep roofs pulled down over their shadowy eyes, were watching intently whatever it was passed between them. Through the pale, uncertain moonlight snowflakes fluttered down like the forerunners of an approaching army. Nothing else moved. And yet the life was there——

A red eye opened suddenly in the dead face of the Rathaus opposite. It seemed to rest on General Beppo Volpi—to fix him with a menacing yet anxious curiosity as though the forces of invisible activity had discovered his alien presence, and had sent someone to inquire: "Who is that man?" And for a moment he was actually afraid. He had ceased to be the victor standing on conquered soil, secure, warm, well fed, with power to send men who defied him to their death. He was alone—in hostile territory—amidst a ghostly hostile people. And up there a signal had been given——

It was an illusion. His alert, strong brain sprang to the rescue. He knew that the Rathaus guardian had left hours before. Under martial law none of the townspeople were allowed abroad after dark, and it was past midnight. Whoever it was up there disobeyed his orders—defied him. He tightened his stern lips. Yes, there it was, Defiance. A vague,

tormenting emotion that had pursued him all that day took definable shape. Everywhere Defiance. These people—these houses—yes, the town itself, defied him, slipped through his fingers, derided his mastery. He might make laws, might enforce them, but there was something he could not do. And it was intolerable. It reduced victory to an abject absurdity. It turned the loss and suffering of that last hideous night into meaninglessness. He would make an end to it. He owed his dead no less. He would make an example as swift, as remorseless as a stroke of lightning. Then there would be peace.

The eye closed. The face of the Rathaus became again blank and enigmatic. The houses up and down the street, that had seemed to stand on tip-toe in their agony of suspense, now sank back into their former dark watchfulness. The snow fell more rapidly, trying to cover over what had happened—to muffle the grind of a rusty lock, the moaning of old hinges. But the General had both heard and seen. Opposite him the Rathaus door had opened on to a deeper gulf of shadow from which two figures emerged, staining the whiteness of the street. They stood quite still. They seemed to be looking about them anxiously, not speaking. In the faltering moonlight that filtered through the thin, slow-moving clouds they looked like two gnomes, creeping out of a deserted mediæval city. The man was bowed and misshapen by some burden——

The General caught back an exclamation. So that was it. The Windstättl Memorial and that old man —that old fury of a woman——

It would have been easy to call out the guard. He did not do so. This, in some curious way, was his affair. It was like a personal challenge. He would make an example. He would teach these people a lesson with his own hands.

How absurd—how childish they were. He could have laughed. Did they really think they could steal like that with impunity? How forlorn and lost they seemed, standing there, already veiled with snow—two crazy old people——

They began to move now. They must have felt that Providence was watching over them, to dare to walk through the streets like that. The old man went first, heavily, and the woman followed with her short, hobbling steps.

The General waited. There was ironic calculation in his patience. He did not want to stop them now. Let them drink deep of their mad hope. It would be more satisfying to his mood to hunt them out of their hovel, drive them back with his revolver in their ribs, force them to replace the shield with their own hands. He wanted—he needed the satisfaction of that personal domination.

He threw his cloak over his shoulder and stepped out of the Gasthaus doorway.

It was as though everyone in the world were dead but himself and those two. He could see them clearly. For there was a queer light abroad. From minute to minute a full moon slid out from amidst the tattered clouds, but it was the snow itself, burning with a dead white fire, which gave to familiar objects their magnified and distorted shapes. The quiet was

absolute. Everything that moved, the clouds, the moon, the snow, moved without sound. Even the General's own footsteps were lost in that profundity of silence. It became difficult to realize himself—to shake off the impression that he had become a shadow without footfall. He had to think—to call up memories, in order to make sure of his own identity. And even his thoughts lost their clearness and became vague and wandering.

The snow was like a white pall.

They went on steadily. He tried to remember where these people lived. Somewhere on the outskirts, he had been told. But they had already passed the outskirts. The last straggling houses lay behind them like a heap of tumbled, blackly shining rocks in the valley. Now they were far out on the high road, that wound up to the summit of the pass, unsheltered from the bitter breath of the mountains, three insignificant specks of movement in that vast, luminous whiteness.

The General drew his breath painfully. His heavily booted feet sank deep in the soft snow. It was difficult to keep up. How strong that old woman must be. They said that she had had five sons. Five! The General's wife had died in childbirth. Five times that bowed, twisted body had been torn by the same pangs, and nothing remained to her but her tottering self and that absurd trophy behind which she stumbled, as though by her crazy persistence she could give significance to five lost and wasted lives. How futile! Here in this emptiness, this remorseless cold, how grotesquely futile! Even as he kept pace with them,

his limbs aching with the effort, he became aware of a futility in himself—in his anger—in his stern purpose. He seemed to have shrivelled—to have withered at the heart.

There was the crucifix which he had ridden past only a few days before. In his hard, military pride he had scarcely glanced at it. It stood up pitifully against the ghostly sky-line—a desolate symbol of human suffering. He leant against it for support, his hand clutched the nailed feet. He was tired, wretched, aware of danger. He wanted to turn back. Already the snow was wrapping itself about him in a smothering sheet of cold. Better to go back, give orders, send out a patrol—arrest these two. That was his obvious, reasonable duty. He saw now that he had been mad to set out on such an adventure. And it was madness to go on. He stood there, shivering, his teeth clenched, the cloak freezing in white, stiff folds about him. Deep in his heart was the knowledge that there was no turning back. From the moment he had left the shelter of the Gasthaus something had happened. The reins of his destiny had been taken from him. He had been caught in the net of a great, invisible event.

The town had gone down in darkness. There was nothing left but the snow and a tiny point of light ahead. They had lit a lantern. It moved on steadily, bearing to the right, away from the high road up the steep flanks of the Königsberg. Suddenly he understood. They were going to the cemetery. Yes—he remembered now. It lay far back from the road—under the heights which had witnessed that last hand-

to-hand struggle—a field sown with crosses. There they would set their memorial, and to-morrow his soldiers would fetch it away—they themselves would pay for their temerity with what remained of their old lives. He would make an example. He had to. Otherwise for what had the dead suffered? What was the meaning of victory? For what had he lived? It was hard to remember. He was cold and tired and confused. Victory, revenge—honour. Just words. He had used them so often that they came of their own accord to the rescue. But to his numbed brain they had become almost meaningless.

The snow deepened. They were off the path now, bearing towards the eastern flank where was the one possible ascent. They had left the cemetery behind them. The General had halted there for a moment, breathless, exhausted, sheltering himself under its crumbling wall. He no longer understood. He had been so sure. The strange light that came and went had filtered through the falling veil of snow, and showed him the huddled crosses whose heads barely rose above the white, mounting tide. The central cross had had a curiously human look, like a shepherd with despairing arms outstretched over his lost flock. The five sons lay there under the snow. But *they* had gone on. They had not even paused. He could see the lantern light, rising—rising steadily—as though it were a fallen star beating its way back.

The General shouted. He shouted to them in German, but his voice froze in his mouth. He started on again, stumbling, falling, groaning. They were climbing now. Between the boulders over which his

feet slipped dangerously, were snow drifts that engulfed him to his knees. And once the ground gave way altogether. He broke straight through into a thick glacial river that rose swiftly from his waist to his arm-pits. He ceased to struggle. He knew what had happened. He had blundered into the old trench that ran diagonally up to the summit of the mountain. It was snow-filled to its brim, a death-trap now as it had been then.

Something queer happened to him. Time was wiped out—the fat, rich years of victorious peace. He was fighting again—he was shouting orders—stumbling along those terrible, haunted warrens that they had carved out of the face of the rock. But he was alone. Everyone but himself—enemies and comrades—had become shadows who watched him from a distance with an aloof pity. He could feel them. They were just beyond the enshrouding cloud. Their guns were stacked. They bivouacked together in their white silence. He alone carried on the struggle—he and that old pair climbing to their death.

A coil of barbed wire plucked at his arm. He caught hold of it. He was beyond pain. Somehow he dragged himself on to the lip of the trench and stood bent and trembling, torn by an anguish of exhaustion. His heart was breaking itself against his breast. But he could not turn back. It was too late. The thoughts of power and retribution had forsaken him. He was an old man, the last of his kind, lost in a world of ghosts. The things that had been sacred to him, and for which the ghosts themselves had died, had become unreal in this vast loneliness.

It was like a final loss—a last crushing bereavement. He felt the tears freezing on his cheek.

The light brightened. A shred of cloud was torn aside and he saw Andreas Hofner and his wife. He was so near to them now that he could hear their voices. Andreas Hofner's wife lay huddled on the snow—Andreas Hofner stood by her, patient and motionless. And now the old man looked like a martyr bowed under his cross.

VII

"Andreas, the lantern has gone out."

"No, it is still burning."

"I cannot see it."

"The snow blinds one——"

"You must go on without me, Andreas. I am tired. I want to sleep."

"It is only a little way," he said.

He gave her his hand. They were so frozen they could not feel each other.

"I shall need you," he said.

So she went on. They had to climb now. There were places where he had to kick footholds for himself and her in the frozen snow. And sometimes he went on ahead, and she had to lift the shield to him when he had reached a place of safety. Sometimes darkness engulfed them and their voices were like the voices of disembodied spirits. And once they lay down side by side as though they were already dead, and he had to rouse her, shaking her by the shoulder.

She had begun to talk to herself. Or rather she talked

to Baby Andreas who, it seemed, walked beside her and comforted her. Baby Andreas had been something of a mother's darling, not very strong, and he had clung to her long after the other children had become sturdily independent. Now it was her turn to cling to him. He put his arm under hers and reassured her, and she told him how it had all happened.

"*Denk Mal, Kleinche!* they wouldn't even let us put up a memorial to you—the memorial that your father carved for you with his own hands. And so we are going to hang it where no one will ever find it—just where you died—up there on the Königsberg."

And Andreas said: "That's fine, *Mutterle.* We shall see it when we march past at nightfall. The regiment will be so proud."

Talking like that they came to the highest peak of all.

Andreas Hofner set down his burden. But even so he couldn't stand upright any more. By the pale yellow light of the lantern he made fast his rope to a jutting point of rock. He worked slowly, for his hands were stiff and almost insensible, and when he had finished the Windstättl Memorial was already buried. The snow had risen to Maria Hofner's knees. She looked half her size—a little old gnome—and she was still talking to Baby Andreas, so that through the scurrying snow and the glacial wind, that came like a blast of death from the ranges of invisible mountains beyond, he could scarcely make her hear.

"There is a ledge thirty feet below. It will be safe there. They will never find it. But I'll not come back, Maria. My hands are all frozen and you

couldn't—you're not strong enough. I shall stay there quietly. It doesn't matter. I am an old man. Go back if you can. But you will never tell anyone—not even the priest, when you are dying—where I have gone."

"Baby Andreas says he will go with you," she said, smiling.

He made the shield fast to his shoulders. He knelt for a moment on the verge of the precipice, calculating his distance, steadying himself.

"When the rope goes slack, throw it after me," he ordered. "There must be no trace—you understand——?"

She nodded. All their farewells were made. They had passed beyond the reach of human grief. He tightened his broken, bleeding hands on the rope and turned stiffly over with his face to the rock——

"Andreas—Andreas——"

He had passed over the verge—far out of reach of that thin voice. Only the General Beppo Volpi heard her. He had tried to run the few yards of the smooth, treacherously sloping summit, but his legs had given way under him and he had fallen. He reached her as the unhitched rope slipped from her hand and flashed over the snow and out of sight, like a writhing, maddened serpent. He followed it almost to the edge of the precipice and crouched down and shouted, but there was no answer.

The old woman said quietly, without astonishment: "He cannot hear you."

He turned to her, crying out in a bitter protest: "What have you done?"

And she answered with the same tranquillity: "We have hung our memorial to our dead children."

He drew himself back into safety. The wind caught the folds of his cape so that it spread out in wide black wings over them both. She lifted her lantern to his face. The light glittered on his medals. Her own face was calm and satisfied.

"You are the Italian General?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And you have brought up all your soldiers. But it is too late. You will never, never find them. They are safe."

The man he had been, would have mocked at her defiance. But he was silent. The snow swirled noiselessly between them. He was thinking of the old man crouched against the face of the precipice, waiting patiently for the end. He thought of the things that men do to one another, and the bitter cold crept up his limbs to his very heart. He put out his hand, clutching her.

"We must get away from here. Get back. Do you understand? If they found you here they might find him. And it would be all for nothing——"

She was quite passive. She let him drag her up the dangerous slope into the relative shelter of the rocks. But he knew that she could not go far. She did not want to. There was no reason. It was finished. She had climbed to a high place where she overlooked the whole of life, and now she was ready to turn her face to the dark. And he too—shorn of everything—the pride of arms—the pride of victory—the pride of vengeance—to what should he return?

"I want to sleep," she muttered. "I want to sleep, Baby Andreas."

He got her half-way down the first ascent, then she collapsed. She knelt in the deep snow—a vague, indecipherable bundle—and for a moment he stood beside her, his hand still clasped in hers. His thoughts were strange, wandering, but quite peaceful. He thought of all the way they had to go, and knew that it was not possible—not even for himself. He was old. He was tired out. He had never really recovered from those months of inhuman suffering. But it was not only that. He could not leave her. Strange, incredible event. He, too, was to die for a lost cause—for a cause not even his. The memorial hanging there for ever beyond human vision, was for him too—for fools, for brave, defeated men.

He bent over her.

"I want you to believe," he said, "I want you to believe that I am glad, *Mütterchen*."

He spoke in German and she pressed his hand. She had heard without understanding, and when she spoke it was to Baby Andreas. She seemed to think he was Baby Andreas, and he knelt beside her and gathered her close to him.

He woke once for a moment, just as dawn broke. The storm must have ceased some hours before, for they were covered with a gentle layer of snow no thicker than a white sheet. He lay with his face to the east, and, lifting himself a little on his elbow, he could see how the invisible sun called in the stars, one after another, and woke the death-like livid mountains to a burning resurrection. He was happy,

without pain, without regret. He was content not to return. If he had gone back he would have had to betray the dead. He would have become again a soldier with a duty to perform, and strange faiths to live by. And all these things had become meaningless. He was already one of those shadows, who looked on men and on the ways of men with that grave remembering pity.

The light brightened. The clear sky beyond the mountains began to shine with colours. It was as though a cleansed, forgiven world stretched itself awake, laughing with the joy of returning life. The tears came into the General's eyes. But they were the weak tears of an aged happiness. He thought of the Windstättl Memorial that beneath the highest peak looked down upon the valley. Already it would be hidden by the snow. Time would efface its inscription. The winter's storm would blot out the face of the dead hero, and the blazing summer's sun rot the wood to dust, that the wind would carry to the ends of the earth. No one would ever see the Windstättl Memorial—only the dead as they filed past at twilight, and the stars.

It seemed to the General that across the morning stillness a bugle sounded—afar off, echoing among the heights.

"Cease fire—cease fire!"

He tried to turn over. But the old woman lay stiffly with her head upon his breast, and he did not want to wake her. He made an effort to cover her more closely with his cloak, but his strength failed him. He forgot what he was trying to do.

He too had fallen asleep.

V

PAS DE QUATRE

V

PAS DE QUATRE

I

Doctor Rosslyn waited until the consultant physician had climbed into his car. Then he closed the door and went back up the broad, shallow staircase. He reflected that though the consultant was an able diagnostician there were some things he hadn't discovered in this particular case. He hadn't guessed, for instance, what lay behind his younger colleague's professional gravity. And yet Rosslyn felt that the truth had been staring out of his eyes—emanating from his whole body.

The old man had merely patted him on the back.

"You look as though you wanted a holiday, my dear fellow."

Doctors always ordered people holidays. Rosslyn had done it himself repeatedly, especially when at a loss. He saw now how absurd it was, and how ironically his patients must have smiled to themselves.

He went slowly. It had been a great strain. Now it was over. Of course he had known. At the bottom of their hearts everyone had known. She herself had been the least self-deceiving of any of them. He remembered the compassionate, enigmatic smile

with which she had met his cheerful protestations and Digby's incessant plan-making.

Poor Digby! He spent his life dragging one bankrupt business after another into prosperity, and he simply couldn't believe that circumstances might be too much for him. Such a lovable, pathetic ass!

Throughout, as far as Rosslyn knew, she had never flinched. If she woke at night to stare into the blackness and face the incredible, monstrous event that was drawing down upon her, by the next morning she had recovered her absolute serenity. She was wonderful—so wonderful as to be puzzling. He had seen many people take the final verdict—most of them with courage—but none of them had attained the quality of her peace. It was as though she had some sweet and secret comfort—a source of strength which she kept jealously hidden from them all. Sometimes she seemed deeply happy. Whatever it was, it made it easier to go back to her.

Digby was out. He didn't know about the consultant physician. They had treated him frankly as a child. In the end she would have to comfort him.

The room had been left in broad daylight. It was like a windless garden, the still air heavy with the scent of flowers, the Persian rugs floating their shadowy colours in a silently flowing tide of sunshine. The low, graceful Regency bed might have been a pretty boat moored in a dim backwater.

Doctor Rosslyn went across to the open windows and drew the curtains. It wasn't that he was afraid to meet her eyes. But he wanted the intimacy of quiet and twilight. The room was too full of luxury. He

would have liked to strip it bare so that he could be alone with her. Queer to think that in a little time he would not come here any more—that the short hours which made the centre and meaning of his day would be cut out.

" Well? "

The small voice just stirred the silence. He came at once and sat down on the edge of her bed. He knew that she had been watching him, drawing on those silent reserves of hers, and now he looked straight at her, grave but untroubled. He could not and would not insult her courage, and their understanding of each other, by an evasion. She laid her thin dry hand on his, pressing it gently.

" Well—how long? "

" He doesn't know exactly. A few weeks—perhaps two months."

She was silent a moment, reflecting.

" Thank you, Stephen."

She had never called him by his Christian name before. It astonished him somehow that she realized he had such a thing—that he had a personality outside his job of keeping people alive. It had sounded very sweet, very deliberate. He sat there, his head bent, listening, as though the sound lingered somewhere in the stillness. He guessed that it had meant a great deal to her—that she had waited and waited, and now the signal had been given, and a fast-closed door thrown wide.

" How long have we known each other? " she asked in her little far-off voice.

" About two years."

" You've looked after me all that time—fought like a Trojan, haven't you? "

" Well—I'm beaten now."

" It doesn't matter. You've been perfect. I'd like to call you Stephen, if you don't mind. My name's Claire, you know. It seems rather silly for dying people to be so formal, don't you think? That sort of thing doesn't matter any more."

He held her hand close. He felt certain that she knew, and that she was saying: " Never mind. It's all right now." He was amazed to find that he was happy—extraordinarily happy, like someone who had been bound hand and foot and then suddenly set free. He sat up straight, involuntarily drawing the first deep breath of release. The colour that had flooded up into his thin, hard-bitten face made him look young and slightly pathetic, as all strong people look when overwhelmed by a rare feeling. She smiled at him almost light-heartedly, as though she were teasing him a little.

" Aren't you glad? "

" Glad? "

" That it's all over, that we're quite certain."

" I don't know."

" And that nothing matters except the truth? "

He considered her with his usual uncompromising steadfastness. She lay back deep among her pillows. The exhaustion that had followed on the consultation had thrown black hollows into her cheeks and deepened the lines about her mouth. She wasn't beautiful. He had never known her beautiful. By the time she had come to him, two years ago, disease had already laid her youth and a famous loveliness in ruins. That, it

had seemed to him at the time, had been her greatest tragedy. Digby himself had spoken of it, tears in his eyes.

" It's awful—you can't understand—you never saw her."

He was glad he had never seen her—grimly proud of a love illicit and stifled as it was—that had grown up out of such rare, clean soil. Other people had loved the beautiful, happy Claire Calvert, but he had loved the disfigured, suffering woman. He remembered the day of their first meeting quite well. She had come into his consulting room and he had scarcely looked at her. Women—people generally—meant nothing to him. A patient was either a sick body or a sick ego. He was, in fact, a hard man, a fighter who had chosen disease as his enemy, and the fight was all that he cared about. He had never loved anyone in his life.

He had taken Claire Calvert's hands. They were dry and withered—just symptoms. He had made the examination with the cold carefulness of a detective gathering his clues, and at last had told her the truth, as far as he knew it. Then for the first time he had met her eyes—those curious, shining, hazel eyes of hers. Perhaps unconsciously he had expected horror, consternation, tears. And she had just smiled reassuringly at him.

" Please don't worry about me, doctor."

He hadn't been worrying. She had been nothing to him. But now a shock of sheer admiration had gone over him. He had recognized in her bearing something more than either bravado or self-control—a gallant and generous spirit.

And from that moment he set himself to fight for her as he had never fought for personal victory.

It had been in vain. She had never had a chance. If she had been older—— But she was young and the disease feasted on her youth.

A few weeks—eight at the outside.

She recalled him gently.

" You do love me, don't you, Stephen? "

" Yes," he answered, with his bleak honesty.

" It's quite all right for you to say so now. Medical and domestic etiquette have to give way. I wanted just to hear you say it."

" I love you."

She closed her eyes.

" These have been the most wonderful two years of my life."

He didn't understand. But he knew that she was going to tell him at last about that secret strength of hers. He bent closer, so that he would not lose one of those faintly falling words.

" You see—people have always loved me, and it's been very lovely to be loved—but often, often I used to think to myself that it was because I was beautiful and happy—and made people happy. Nobody knew about me—the real me—or cared. I often thought about this happening—and wondered—just how much would be left. I never dreamed that just when I was really bankrupt, with nothing to give but trouble—a great love might be given me. After all, the glory of life doesn't lie in its length, does it? I might have lived to be an old, old woman and never known how wonderful it might be."

He was deeply moved and oddly unashamed of being moved. Yet the hard logic in him wanted to reason the thing out to the end. He couldn't rest, not knowing the whole truth.

"But Digby," he said; "Digby—don't you love him?"

"Of course. No one could help it. He's so generous and anxious and faithful. So pathetic. Every day he lays his flowers at the altar of a memory."

"A memory?"

"Of the woman he loved so passionately. But I'm not that woman any more. I remember her. She was charming. They made the most lovely couple. But she's dead."

"I don't know about all that. He's breaking his heart."

Her lips quivered.

"It won't break—not quite."

"Well—whatever people mean by breaking their hearts."

She moved a little so that her face was towards the curtained windows. Her eyes were wide open, and he felt that she was seeing something that was hidden from him.

"Digby's so healthy and strong and eager. He shrinks from the very thought of death."

"That's true. He won't believe that you're not getting better. He won't believe even now."

He caught the enigmatic shadow of her smile.

"Poor Digby. He's puzzled and frightened. He wants the old me to come back dreadfully. But if I don't——"

" Well? "

" He just can't help turning towards hope."

" My dear——"

" Oh, I'm glad—frightfully glad. Stephen—the new me—the dying me, couldn't have borne the burden of such a responsibility. I'm free."

Their silence was like a deep, strong tide, sweeping away the last barrier between them. In it they seemed to speak to each other for the first time. Neither knew how long it lasted.

The sound of a car turning into the gates roused them to look at each other.

" Perhaps—two months? " she whispered.

" Yes."

" Our whole lives—our very own."

He held her hand hard between both his. Something was rending him, tearing down the restraints of years. It hurt—and yet it was beautiful, too—a kind of difficult, splendid surrender. He lifted her hand and kissed it.

II

Digby felt as though someone had hit him over the heart—stunned and sick. The red, heavy-headed roses which he had brought for her lay on the table, where he had put them in order to give a hand to that doctor fellow. They seemed to make fun of him. He could hear the echo of his own fatuously cheerful: " Well, Rosslyn, how goes it? A bit better to-day, don't you think? " And the long glass opposite held

the ghost of his laughing face. He stared at himself uncomprehendingly. For all his pallor and the expression of bewildered consternation, he made a fine figure of a man—fair skinned and upright, with clear eyes and square shoulders and lean flanks. He looked so strong—the very embodiment of security. He couldn't connect himself with the thought of death—dissolution—simply couldn't. And yet in two months—at the outside—Claire—his wife—the romance of his life—would be gone—beyond his reach. The place would be empty of her for ever.

His first impulse had been to rush upstairs to her, take her in his arms as he used to do after they had been cruelly separated for a few days, and hold her fast. But then he remembered. She had to be spared all excitement, all strain. He couldn't even cry his heart out on her shoulder. He had to be calm—as brave as she was. For ten minutes he had stood there staring at himself, trying to fix on some attitude that he could take up and carry through to the end. But everything seemed unreal and intolerable. What could one say to someone who had just been sentenced to death—someone whom one loved? How could one go on living with them—eating, sleeping, talking, with the future closing down like a shutter, and the pitifully sweet past jogging one's memory? Two months? The two years had been cruel enough. But then he had been able to pretend to himself. He had been cheerful, and had made plans of what they would do when she was well again. Pretence, of course, eating at one's heart, but still making life endurable.

Now there was nothing for it but surrender, a grim, awful waiting face to face with the truth.

Two months. If it were only now—both of them together.

He began to move about the room. The pain seemed to have become physical. It wouldn't let him rest. Nor could he go up to her—not yet. She would understand. Finally he threw open the long French window and went down into the garden.

It was the loveliest garden of a luxurious and expensive suburb. It had been his gift to her—an integral part of his campaign. In a few weeks, by dint of a white-hot energy and prodigality, he had transformed its previous commonplaceness into a paradise of rare flowers, which in the red evening sunlight shone like the jewels of a great necklace. Even now it was difficult to believe that he should have failed.

At the bottom was a private gate that led out into the roadway. It opened and he saw a woman come up the path. He recognized her with a sensation of almost passionate relief. He was like a rudderless ship, manned by a panic-stricken crew, who had come suddenly in sight of land. Lucy Garfield! Claire's friend and his—someone who loved them both, whose handclasp was a thing of understanding and infinite comfort. He went to meet her, hurrying, as though he could not bear another moment of his forlornness.

He had an idea that she knew already. She was hatless, and walking quickly, too, with that bearing of quiet, vigorous purpose which he liked so well. The sunlight shone on the thick ash-blonde hair. The

early silver scarcely showed. Not young any more —older than Claire. There was a faint hint of matronly breadth about the fine gracious figure. Yet her glowing health, her sunny and gallant temper with its undertone of womanly tenderness and pity, made her one of those people whose age is of no significance. They are young for ever.

She took his hand. Her own was both warm and cool, gentle and strong. Her eyes met his with a steady gravity.

"I saw the two cars," she said. "I guessed that Doctor Rosslyn had called in another opinion. I tried to wait, but I couldn't. I was too anxious."

"It's all over," he said simply. "It's a question of weeks now."

They turned and walked slowly side by side towards the house. It had been their custom to meet like this on the fine summer evenings, and to pick out the finest blooms for Claire before they went up to her together. The few minutes of her companionship had been something to look forward to. They strengthened him for the tragic ordeal of that sick-room where he sat hour after hour, facing death and pretending he didn't see. If only Claire had gone on being Claire—— But she had changed. Physically he wouldn't have recognized her. But it was more than that. She had drifted away—almost out of hearing. More and more, for all his tormenting love and pity, he had felt like a stranger. He was embarrassed when Lucy left them.

"I believe I've known all along," he said.

"You've been very brave, Digby."

"No; rather a coward. I didn't dare admit it myself. It seemed incredible. She had been so lovely and full of life. You know—I used to think we were the happiest people in the world."

"I know you made her very happy."

"It's good of you to say so, Lucy. It comforts me. You've been a wonderful friend. You've known and loved Claire all your life, and you might so easily have been—well—jealous or disapproving; felt that I wasn't good enough for her. But you've been my friend too."

"I wanted to be when I saw what you were to her—a perfect lover always."

He flushed deeply.

"I don't know; I've wondered lately. I seem somehow to have lost touch; I've been stupid with wretchedness; I felt as though I were failing her."

"It's not that. My poor Claire! It's been a slow, slow dying; and dying people are all by themselves. We stretch out hands, but can't reach them any more. It's not your fault. Claire understands better than anyone."

He was silent. He didn't trust his voice. She comforted him immeasurably. And yet he knew that she herself was in bitter need of comfort. He glanced swiftly at her profile and saw how pale she was—deathly pale. She loved Claire. There had always been something between these two—a rare and exquisite understanding, such as is possible only between women —which had sometimes left him outside. Somehow he hadn't minded. He loved beautiful things and he saw that it was beautiful, their closeness to each other.

Even now, when Claire was drifting away faster and faster, Lucy had somehow managed to keep close. She would follow to the very edge of the grave. At the thought a new inexplicable pang shot through him.

"Lucy, they've been rather wonderful—these two years, haven't they? I mean—life isn't just happiness, is it? I didn't know anyone like Claire could be so brave and patient; or that anyone could have such a friend as you have been to us."

"Oh, Digby dear, what have I done that anyone wouldn't have done?"

"You've been yourself. That's all. Of course you don't see how splendid that is. Lucy, I'm a clumsy, stupid fellow. I don't know what I should have done without you. You won't desert me?"

"Desert you?"

"You'll stand by?"

"You know I will."

He heard the puzzled reproach in her low husky voice.

"I mean—as my friend—not just because I'm Claire's husband—because—you're the only person I shall have left."

"Of course—I am your friend."

"Always?"

"Always."

The path was steep, and they stood still a moment, a little breathless, looking down at a cluster of red roses. Another day they would have picked them for her, but now the thought of flowers tasted of death. He knew that there were tears on his companion's cheeks. But he couldn't care. It was as though

somewhere—inside himself—on the horizon of some inner vision, a tiny spark had kindled and was brightening and glowing, and was spreading fast until it filled the whole of him with an indescribable warmth. He had to close his eyes lest he should see what he must not see—not yet.

A maidservant stood at the open window.

"If you please, sir, the mistress asks if you and Miss Garfield would come up."

They had both started, as though for a moment they had forgotten. They turned quickly, guiltily. Twilight covered the garden with a vague enchantment. Lucy Garfield stumbled. He gave her his arm. He knew that she had seen too. Her hand trembled with foreknowledge. A moment later she drew away from him and went on alone.

III

Claire had heard Stephen Rosslyn's car turn out of the drive. But she did not expect Digby to come to her. Not at first. He would be too terribly shaken. He would go out into the garden, and since it was Lucy's visiting time he would meet her, as he often did, and they would comfort each other. She smiled faintly to herself.

Her thoughts were very tender of them both, but they seemed a long way off. She felt towards them as an explorer might feel towards people he was leaving behind him. All that was real to her was the journey and the man who would know how to bring her

safely out of harbour. Still, she wanted to do the best she could.

So she had sent for them. She wanted them together. She had an odd physical and emotional shrinking from the idea of being alone with either of them. She felt that they would try to get too near to her, lay hold of her and drag her back into being one of them. And she wasn't one of them any more. She was a person apart, with a new and different life of her own. She was dying.

She wondered if she were heartless. She tried to recapture herself and Digby. She remembered that she had been beautiful and very gay and happy, and Digby a most perfect lover. It wasn't only his prodigal generosity. He had always done things enchantingly and splendidly mad. One night he had waited five hours in a bitter snowstorm just to see her come home from a dance, and even then he hadn't spoken to her, but had lifted his hat with a grave and gallant salute, as though she had been a princess. And after they were married he had been the same. He seemed to know instinctively what other men found out too late, that love, however steadfast, is a curious and exquisite thing, able to withstand tempest and disaster, but not frost. He had been her husband, her friend and her wooer. And because of the very stuff of youth and life that was in them, they had wonderful times. She remembered how they had laughed—like children.

And then death, which, had it come suddenly, would have simply broken the survivor's heart, had gently laid its hand on her and drawn her away from him. Neither of them had known quite what was happening.

It had been so gradual. It was as though very slowly they had begun to speak a different language. His distress had been pitiful, but he could do nothing. His health and instinctive joy of life had been like a baffling wall between them.

In his place had come a man to whom death was the commonplace of life—a grim ungracious comrade who, for all his indifference to suffering, knew what suffering meant. He cared nothing for the laughter and beauty which she had lost. He rarely laughed, and she knew by the way he thrust aside her flowers that their beauty was hidden from him. But he had come to love her. Through the ugliness and humiliation of illness his love reached her, and held her fast in its protection. It was like a miracle. It made death a revelation of life.

The door opened. She shivered a little. They were so big and strong. It was like a blast of crude rough wind. She knew that they were ashamed. And after that first moment's recoil she was sorry for their tragic embarrassment. She held out her hand and Digby caught it and kissed it. The familiar, cheery: "Well, darling, how goes it?" had risen visibly to his lips and had died there. Suddenly like a boy overwhelmed with grief he dropped on his knees beside her, burying his face against her arm.

She looked at Lucy. They were two women understanding each other. They even smiled, though the tears had gathered in Lucy's eyes. Claire knew how Lucy loved her. She held out her free hand over the bowed head between them. And so they remained a moment.

"You mustn't," Claire whispered. "You mustn't be so dreadfully unhappy—either of you. My dears, it comes to everyone; it will to you, you know. And I've had such a wonderful life. No one could have had more love." She felt Digby's fierce confirmative pressure, but she was not thinking of him. "I'd be content and happy—if only you were too."

He stood up almost roughly.

"Don't, Claire. You mustn't say things like that —impossible things. It's—a sort of outrage. What will my life be if you leave me?"

She thought wearily to herself, suppose she told him the truth; suppose she said: "My dear, my death will be the crisis of a long misery for you. You will suffer frightfully, but then you'll begin to get better. In a few months you will be your old self, the self you haven't been for two years—since we began to lose each other. Besides, I love Steve Rosslyn."

But of course she couldn't. Only the dying can face the truth.

"I want you to be very quiet and listen," she said faintly. "You know, the end might come any time, and there's something I want to say—to both of you. At first—I meant to say it only to Lucy. But we three love one another. We can surely trust one another."

He bent over her.

"Claire—my darling—what is it?"

She felt how difficult it was going to be. He was so simple and sincere, so desperately unhappy. He wouldn't even know that he was lying. She drew Lucy close to her as though for support. She felt

that Lucy guessed and was gathering all her strength together. They two would have to manage him between them.

"In a way, of course, I don't need to ask. It will happen, sooner or later. But I wanted to make it easy. You are both such darlings—so loyal—I wanted you to know it would make me happy."

"Claire," he began passionately, "if there was anything—my dearest, you know I'd give my life."

"Yes, dear, I do know. It's not that; not a sacrifice. Digby, you and Lucy are young still; young enough to be very happy. I want you—when the time comes—to marry each other."

He stood with his shoulders thrust back. He looked very handsome and very stern.

"Claire, you don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. I've thought it all out. I haven't much strength. You mustn't make me say things over and over again. Digby, dear, you will marry. You couldn't live alone. You might marry someone to whom I should just be a hateful thought. My memory would have to be locked away in your heart, and perhaps it would die for lack of freedom. I—I should hate that. You and Lucy love me. I should be safe with you."

He began passionately: "Has either of us given you any reason——?"

She stopped him with a faint gesture. She was very tired. Their strength, their overflowing vigour, seemed to fill the room with tumult. She wanted to close her eyes and be alone with her dreams—with Stephen Rosslyn, the lover of her soul.

"You have been falling in love with each other for two years. You love each other. Isn't that true?"

"No," he said.

"Lucy, isn't it true?"

The two women looked at each other. Lucy Garfield was very pale, but she held herself proudly.

"Yes," she said, "it is true."

"Thank you. I was sure you would be brave. Bless you. It's all I wished; I'm quite happy."

Quite free. She closed her eyes. Digby would make a scene. He would protest and argue, defend himself. He wouldn't understand. She would just pretend.

"Lucy!"

He had turned to her with a cry of utter reproach. How could she—how dared she! It wasn't true. Worse than that—she was betraying a secret—his secret—their secret. It was a terrible thing. Breaking a dying woman's heart. His wife—the only woman he had ever loved.

"Lucy!" he whispered.

His heart seemed to die within him, and then suddenly to burst into a new, terrible and wonderful life—like a lamp overturned by a great wind, that after a moment's darkness blazes up and sets everything on fire. He saw what was in Lucy's eyes. It was superb. He could have denied it only at the cost of his honour. Between these two he had grown insignificant. He had only one chance to be as big as they were.

"I——" he began.

She laid her finger to her lips, silencing him. He turned. He saw that Claire had fallen asleep.

"When she is awake I will tell her the truth, too, Lucy. I have loved you."

"She knows already," Lucy said.

IV

To the neighbours it was at first a mere headline, less thrilling than a murder or a divorce case, and having no personal interest for them.

Then someone said, "Why, there's Mrs. Calvert!" —and the thing blazed up and spread like a prairie fire. They saw that their expensive and placid suburb had become the centre of a modern drama. They were the onlookers at a race between life and death as titanic as any struggle from classic legend. And though they backed life to the last man, they were secretly pleased that the race was so close, so desperately close. They were very rich and very bored.

Had the discovery, made in far-off Canada, been made in time? Every resource of science had been called into action. Wireless messages flew across the Atlantic. A great Canadian specialist, armed with authority, was already on his way. The neighbours knew the name of his boat and the date and hour of its arrival. They followed its course passionately. The very weather became a factor in their calculations. They talked of the forces of cross currents and unfavourable head-winds. A fog in the Channel, reported with the liner's approach to Cherbourg, brought something like consternation.

Then it was heard that a special train had been ordered. Doctor Rosslyn, grim and silent, had gone to meet it.

Gallant Digby Calvert! Gallant husband!

His house looked as usual—calm and impregnable with wealth. But the passers-by, glancing up furtively at the windows, had a vision of what lay behind their sleekness—the still young, once beautiful woman, holding out hour by hour, her eyes fixed on the distance, for the rescue that might still come; the man who loved her, reassuring and steady, heart-sick with dread; the faithful friend who never faltered in her courage, the household, like an ironic commentary, running smoothly on its well-oiled wheels.

No noise, no crying out. And yet the stolid walls masked scenes of unimaginable emotion. The thought of them melted the hardest and most indifferent.

When at last the great limousine swung into the drive and the two men passed through the instantly opened door, a sigh of relief went up. The antagonists were locked. And all sorts of unexpected people said: "Please God, please God!"

Lucy Garfield waited with Digby in his library. Claire had wanted her. But she wished she hadn't come. The room's beautiful expensiveness irked her. It made her feel unreal, like an actress in a play. Digby seemed unreal, too, standing there with his set, white face. They hadn't spoken or looked at each other. It occurred to Lucy that they hadn't really spoken for weeks; not since that day when hope had broken on them like an unexpected dazzling light.

They had avoided each other's eyes. All their strength —all their purpose—had been set on the one point, saving Claire, and there was no " themselves " and no future.

And yet——

She glanced shyly at him. Just for a moment her tired mind slipped its leash. What was going on behind that front of stern masculinity? Was he thinking of her? No, he wouldn't dare; no more than she dared think of him. They had put their love away—out of sight. But it was there. What was happening to it in the silence and darkness? All sorts of sharp, broken questions flashed by her like points of fire. She let down an iron shutter against them. They were too terrible.

It was Digby who spoke first. The loved familiar voice sent a shock along her straining nerves, as though a stranger had suddenly used his tones.

" What a time they are! It's unendurable."

" I know. Perhaps it's a good sign."

" Yes. How—how was she? "

" Quite calm. You'd think she was the last person concerned."

" Oh, she's braver than any of us."

One of the forbidden thoughts leaped into her mind. It wasn't courage, not altogether. Claire didn't want to live. Her living was tragic. Because everything that had made life worth while had been taken from her. It was as though they had stripped her body before she were dead, and now, if she were not to die, she would never forget.

" Digby! "

He made a curt gesture. Someone was coming downstairs. In a minute they would know.

They looked at each other. It might well be that it was the last time they would be able to meet each other's eyes with truth. Their love that had seemed so blessed, like a treasure stowed away safely against the distant future, had become a wicked, torturing, fiercely desiring thing. They had been so innocent and loyal. They had become traitors.

Lucy closed her eyes so that she should not see what was in his any more. She saw instead, in one swift picture after another—Claire—Claire the pretty child, the gay schoolgirl, the happy lovable woman, the friend! The wonderful friend! Their friendship had been one of the sweetest things in life. They had been so proud of it. They had often said: "Nothing can ever come between us."

And now upstairs Claire was thinking to herself—oh, terrible things; true things!

The door opened. Rosslyn stood on the threshold. At the sight of him Lucy's heart seemed to leap in her breast—with what emotion she never knew. His wooden face was colourless, and there was a gleam of moisture about his lips. She heard his voice, far-off and without expression.

"It's all right. We were just in time."

After what seemed an interminable, insufferable pause, Digby said: "Thank God!" And at that Lucy Garfield began to laugh, and from laughter passed to the bitterest weeping.

V

They had given Claire a hand-glass, and every now and again she took it up and looked at herself. And she saw that she was growing young and beautiful.

The windows stood wide open. It was a warm and lovely summer, and to-morrow she was to go out into the garden for the first time. And after that the wheels of life would begin to spin again—faster and faster. Presently she would go ahead—the Riviera probably; Monte Carlo. She smiled involuntarily. Oh, the gay days! How they had laughed sometimes. Digby understood laughter.

He was like a boy. The littlest things might hide a big glorious joke for him. An incurable boy.

Digby.

Her smile died. She had forgotten. That was all over. Digby and Lucy. Poor darlings. How unhappy they were. They tried so hard to pretend that nothing had happened, and they couldn't look her in the face. Their pitiable guiltiness hurt her. For, after all, it was her fault. It was she who had driven them into the open—just to save her own soul—to set herself free. Well, now she had to play the game—see the thing through. Besides, she wanted nothing better. It was all quite simple. She had Stephen—Stephen, the friend and comforter, who had gone down with her to the very gates of death.

She wondered if he would go with her to Monte Carlo. She would ask him. The climate suited her.

And she liked the place. At least she had been very happy there.

The door opened. There was Digby. He always came at the same time, very punctually and faithfully, with his gift of flowers for which there wasn't a spare vase. Without opening her eyes she could see his white face smiling fixedly at her.

"Well, darling, how goes it?"

He laid his hand on hers and she returned the pressure firmly. She smiled back at him, and she knew her smile was as lifeless as his own. It need not have been. Life welled up in her like the waters of a secret spring. It made her impatient, almost resentful.

"Better and better. You know to-morrow I'm to be allowed into the garden."

"Splendid! We'll have a sort of reception."

"Never mind about that now. Sit down a moment. I want to talk to you. I can't bear you to be unhappy."

"Unhappy? But I'm not."

"Aren't you?" She shook her head. She hated to see him flush with shame. He had always been so frank—so proudly honest. "Oh, my dear, aren't we friends enough? Do you really imagine that I've forgotten, and that you two can put your heads in the sand and hide from me—you and Lucy? You know—nothing has really changed—except that I'm alive when I ought to be dead."

"Claire—don't, please—it's too hateful—to talk like that."

"It isn't hateful; only truthful. We three made

a contract, and I've broken my share of it. I've put you in a horrible position."

"It's as though you were laughing at us—at everything."

"I'm not. Perhaps if I did——"

She broke off, sighing. It would be nice to laugh again. Only he would be so hurt. He sat there on the edge of her bed with his face hidden in his hands —pathetically young—like a schoolboy, ashamed and humiliated, driven to confession. And it wasn't his fault at all.

"Claire—I'm not a fool. Of course I've realized —I've been trying to make up my mind—I wanted you to understand how it had happened. You know—don't you?—that from the first day I set eyes on you I never looked at anyone else; I never wanted to. It wasn't only that you seemed to me the loveliest woman in the world. You were my friend and my companion. Wherever I went you came too—in spirit, in thought, in action. We two—we were just two parts of one person, weren't we?"

"Yes, dear."

"It would have gone on like that. We weren't just in love. We were real lovers. We'd have grown older—slowly—side by side—adjusting ourselves to the same measure. Then came your illness. It sounds horrible, I know—but just when you needed me most I lost touch. You see—it was as though in our—our going towards death you had run on ahead—away from me. You left me behind. And just because I loved you so I was desperately lonely."

"Digby—please—I do understand."

He almost wrung his hands

"I know everything you must be thinking; I know how wretchedly I must have seemed to fail you. We both know. Lucy said once: 'She doesn't want to live because she feels she has lost everything.' That nearly smashed me up. To think that I—of all people in the world—should make you suffer."

"Dear I haven't suffered."

His eyes were blind with tears.

"You only say that."

"But it's true I haven't."

"For God's sake, don't be generous; it just breaks my heart."

"You see, I was in love myself."

He frowned, as though he hadn't heard clearly.

"What?"

"I am in love too."

"I don't understand. You mean—with me?"

"With Stephen."

"Stephen? In God's name—Stephen what?"

"Didn't you know that Doctor Rosslyn's name was Stephen?"

He stared at her with wide incredulous eyes. Then to her complete astonishment he almost shouted: "The blackguard!" and strode over to the window, standing there with clenched fists, his face averted so that she could see nothing but his profile. Still, it was a very pleasing profile. Strong and sensitive and laughter-loving. She wondered, in a detached sort of way, why he couldn't laugh now. She could have laughed. But that was because of the life that was

beginning to run through her like a happy song. It was getting terribly easy to be happy. And she mustn't; he would be too hurt; it wasn't fair.

"Can't you understand," she said gravely, "that I was lonely too?"

He turned reluctantly. "Lonely?"

"It is lonely—dying."

"And that fellow——"

"He came too. He was my companion. He went with me where you couldn't go. When I knew about you and Lucy I was glad. It set me free."

His voice sounded muffled and unsteady.

"Very fortunate; very convenient."

"Don't be bitter, Digby."

But she was looking at her hands, spread out on the white coverlet, and forgot what she was going to say. Her hands had worried her terribly. There had been no escape from them. She had had to watch them wither. Now they were like flowers in sunshine after a sharp frost. They were growing beautiful. They reminded her of her rings—the great diamond that Digby had given her, her favourite emerald and sapphire. To-morrow she would wear them again. And she had locked them away for ever. How strange and wonderful!

Then she remembered.

"It's no good being bitter. And why should we grudge each other happiness? Did you want me to be alone? Don't you realize that now you are free too? That's why I told you. I wanted you to feel that you had a right to each other."

He was staring at her as though she were a puzzling stranger.

"What is to happen now? What do you expect?"

"That we should all behave with dignity and kindliness. There's no need for resentment. Something has happened that can't be changed. We four have just got to go our ways."

"Lucy and I; you—and—and that man?"

"And Stephen Rosslyn," she agreed.

As she spoke they heard Rosslyn's car turn into the drive. Digby made a queer, strangled gesture, like a man desperately seeking expression, and his eyes lighting on the flowers he had brought her, he seized them and threw them out of the window.

"You don't want them, anyway," he stammered.

She knew that he nearly slammed the door. It was unreasonable, but also rather touching and very young of him to want everything and everybody—the whole world. She rather wanted it herself. But she overcame the impulse to call him back and put her arms round him and kiss him.

After all, one had to choose.

And they had chosen.

VI

The two men met in the hall. Rosslyn half held out his hand and then let it drop, and the movement put him at a disadvantage, and he flushed painfully so that for a moment Digby went hot with a vicarious shame.

He had never really thought of Rosslyn as a man.

He had seen him as a clever, trustworthy doctor, a confidant, but nevertheless a person apart, outside their circle, not to be judged by ordinary standards. His manners and his appearance hadn't mattered. Now Digby saw that he was both clumsily made and undersized, and that however much he might pay for his clothes they would never fit him. No need to be told that he had begun life as a shoe-black. The arrogance of the self-made success and the defiant awkwardness of a man out of his element were written all over him.

And Claire loved him—Claire, who had loved Digby Calvert. Digby felt as though the earth were giving way under his feet.

Still, somebody had to behave with dignity. And he, the injured husband, at least as the——

His thoughts made a hurried jump. What he had to say could be said at once and briefly.

"Mrs. Calvert has told me," he began. "I don't know how the other members of your profession would regard your conduct, and I don't propose to ask them. I intend to protect my wife as long as she is my wife, and I shall set her free myself. That is all that I have to say to you."

He went on towards his library. He had behaved well, but he felt oddly miserable and physically almost broken.

At the door he couldn't help saying: "I hope to God you'll make her happy!" in a voice that gave the formula a harsh and aching truth.

This time the door actually slammed.

Stephen Rosslyn climbed the stairs heavily. He was

still flushed with shame. He wondered why she hadn't warned him. It wasn't quite fair. He had looked like a fool and a blackguard. And, anyway, what was he doing in all this mess? His life, that had seemed so certain, so grimly secure, was in pieces. He had lost control. He felt as though he were being whirled downwards—Heaven knew where—on the crest of an avalanche. He couldn't think of his work. Perhaps in a few weeks he wouldn't have any work to think about. There would be a hideous scandal. He would have to begin all over again.

That was what love did to a man.

Well, he did love her. It was the one romance of his life. He had never even had a friend. He had been a lonely, morose fellow whom no one had bothered to understand. But she had understood. She had been lonely too. They had been like castaways on a desolate shore. They had come together in their bitter need.

The memory of her poor wan face, turned to greet him as though he had been the sunlight, melted his brief resentment. It made everything worth while—every sacrifice. They would stand shoulder to shoulder against the world. He would never count the cost.

He entered her room firmly, eagerly.

His picture of her was so vivid that for a moment he stopped short, staring stupidly, as though he had blundered upon a stranger. He had forgotten. Or perhaps something had happened—had been happening a long time and he hadn't realized.

It had happened to her.

It wasn't that she hadn't always been fastidiously

careful about her person. At her weakest she had clung bravely to the delicacies and decencies of civilized life. But this, he knew, was different. It was something from which he instinctively recoiled—something alien and half-frightening. She was like an exquisite, many-hued bird preening itself after the storm, or a butterfly that had broken from its chrysalis. The dying, necessitous human being had gone. She lay there because she chose—luxuriating and beautiful—rising slenderly out of a foam of white, her dark hair crowned with gold, and something shining in the delicate oval face that he had never seen before.

He went towards her because she was watching him and waiting. But he went heavily. She gave him her hand. How often he had kissed its piteousness, its veined and bony piteousness. She had stretched it out as though he had been a rescuer in a stormy sea, and he knew that his touch and his kiss had comforted her. But to-day her gesture was full of a subtle challenge which made him hold back. He stood there, stiff and stupid, looking down at her, and the smile faded from her lips.

" I have just seen—your husband," he said. " He knows."

" Yes—I told him."

" You might have warned me."

" I'm sorry. It's been a reality to me for so long that I felt as though everybody knew—in their hearts. What did he say? "

" Very little. He was generous—according to his lights."

" Digby's lights aren't bad," she interposed. " And he has always been generous—in everything."

" He said he would set you free."

She shook her head.

" We couldn't allow that, could we, Stephen? After all, he'd go on living with me. It's we who are running away. We must pay the price."

She had seemed to ask his agreement. But he knew she had stated her deliberate decision.

To a woman of her class it wouldn't matter much. She would live it down. Wealth and position would buffer her from a temporary discomfort. And she didn't think of him. But he saw himself, torn from his roots, trailed at her heels into a glittering life that was strange and horrible as a nightmare.

" Yes, of course," he said.

" We must go soon, Stephen. Before everything becomes intolerable."

His mind ran to his patients. There was Colonel Anstruther—an extraordinary case—it would have been a feather in his cap. But now——

" You're not strong enough," he objected.

" Oh, yes, I am; strong enough to get out of this quickly; but not strong enough to stay."

" My work——"

" Get someone to take your place temporarily. Afterwards—— Of course we could never come back here."

Something hot welled up in him. How calmly she took it! The thing for which he had starved and sweated tossed aside like a worn-out dress.

" I have money enough for us both," she said.

" But I couldn't——" he began violently.

She pressed his hand—a convulsive pressure.

" Stephen, I'm sorry; that was crude and brutal of me. I—I was thinking of—of—ways and means—how to escape. But of course I understand. You couldn't give up your work—not for always."

" I shall have to," he said. " Even if I'm not struck off the register it isn't likely anyone will come to a man who—who—did what I am going to do."

" But you can take up research? You've always wanted to. You shall have the finest laboratory in the world."

There was something feverish and almost panic-stricken about her. It was as though she were afraid and were trying to bribe him. She was clinging to him. When she had been ill and ugly she had clung to him, and he had been proud and happy. But now he had a violent physical impulse to get away, out of reach of that white hand—that delicate, repellent perfume.

" It's awfully good of you," he brought over his stiff lips.

" Stephen—you think it's worth while? You still want me? "

" I am not the sort of man to change my mind," he said with a kindling defiance. Then, half ashamed, he stammered hastily: " I've never loved anyone else. I—I couldn't live without you. Surely you know that."

Their eyes met. She closed hers instantly as though overcome by a sudden exhaustion. But he suspected her. She was acting. She wasn't tired at all. She

hadn't wanted to meet his eyes. She had been afraid; as afraid as he was himself.

And only a few weeks ago her dying gaze had hung on him. They had sat for minutes together, silent, their souls locked, their sight piercing the outer shell to their very innermost selves.

He didn't know what to do or say. The old clumsiness which had always paralysed him the moment he had to do with people outside his profession, held him blankly silent. In a kind of panic his fingers slid to her pulse.

She answered with a faint start. The movement had been so unexpected, so utterly incongruous. It had been part of his routine when she had been dying, but as a lover there was something tragically funny about it.

She felt laughter—a scornful, ironical laughter—rise in her throat.

" Dear Stephen, I'm all right. Don't."

She had to look at him. He had taken out his watch and was staring at it with an absurd fixity. She saw his red, bony wrist, which always gave one the unjustifiable impression that he had forgotten his cuffs. His tie had come up over the top of his collar. There was something about his neck, determined, capable and commonplace, which made her think of a back parlour and fumed oak. She could almost smell the atmosphere.

And she was going to live with him all the rest of her days. She was going to ask him to go to Monte Carlo.

Suddenly the laughter was too much for her. It broke from her like a cascade—so gay, so sweet sound-

ing that she lay back, breathless, and listening as though to the echo of music. Why, she hadn't laughed like that for two years. A spell had broken. The room threw off its pall of dim melancholy. The world lay outside waiting for her.

Stephen Rosslyn had let her wrist drop. He stood up. He felt that someone had slapped him across the face—slapped him awake. He found himself in a room full of flowers and sunlight and rich and expensive useless things—with a strange woman. The strange woman was frighteningly beautiful.

And she was laughing at him.

VII

It was a celebration. The garden made a fitting background. Digby couldn't help being proud of it. The sunshine and the blue sky, paling to twilight, made the prettily dressed women look like living flowers, and the men their sombre, careful gardeners. Claire sat in the midst of them. She was radiant. Wherever he went Digby seemed to see her. Her voice, low and gentle, transcended the confused murmur by sheer sweetness. In the old days it had been such fun—stealing wicked glances at each other: "Oh, my darling, how lovely when all these stupid people have gone!" But now she never looked at him.

"It's nothing short of a resurrection," someone commented congratulatingly.

But it was Lucy who told the truth.

"She has grown more beautiful than ever," she said.

They stood together on the edge of the group that surrounded Claire like a court. Digby didn't want to be there. It wasn't dignified. He had tried to keep away. But he was drawn back each time as though by a fine, strong thread. He made himself talk to Lucy.

" I shall be thankful when it's all over," he said. " It's a wretched farce. It makes me feel utterly unreal."

" Sometimes I have to pinch myself to make sure I am really awake," Lucy said. " After all, Claire and I have been such friends."

Her point of view seemed to him very trivial. What did a mere friendship matter? A friendship between women. Negligible. That weak-kneed hound, Rosslyn!

" Of course I can't interfere," he said. " Everybody makes their own fate. But what she sees in him, God alone knows."

" What do you see in me, my dear? " Lucy asked.

He said " Ah! " gallantly, and looked at her with a smile which in spite of himself grew a little stiff. It was probably the faërie quality of the summer twilight and Claire's fragile loveliness that made Lucy seem unexpectedly set and elderly. He hadn't noticed, before, her undoubted tendency towards—stoutness. He had thought of her as a sort of Ceres. He hoped she wouldn't overdo things. But she would make an excellent travelling companion—capable and reasonable. Much better than Claire, who always insisted on at least four hat-boxes. He remembered that time on the Italian frontier on their way to Monte Carlo, and laughed out loud. He couldn't have helped himself. It had been so frightfully funny. They had sat in their sleeper

afterwards absolutely doubled up with the jolly pain of it.

Claire had heard him laugh. She turned her head involuntarily, and their eyes met. He was horribly ashamed. She must have thought that he was enjoying himself with Lucy.

"I was remembering that custom-house fellow we met," he stammered. "I don't know why. He just came into my mind."

He spoke with unnecessary loudness, and everyone turned to listen. They expected him to tell the story. A faint rose had crept into Claire's cheeks. He could have killed himself. It was a ghastly, inexcusable thing to have said under the circumstances. And he wasn't really crude and tactless. Only he hadn't wanted her to think——

"Digby is a big schoolboy," Claire murmured excusingly. "A joke will go on amusing him for years."

She turned the conversation. He knew that she had meant to snub him, but he was resentfully sure that she wasn't as casual as she seemed. She would have been more—or less—than human if she hadn't remembered it too—that sweet Italian morning.

And there was that Rosslyn fellow. Of course he had to be there. In a way, he was the hero of the afternoon. Oh, very much the hero. He had saved her life. Good Lord, he looked as though he had slept in that coat! He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands or his mouth. And Claire loved him! There were things beyond mortal understanding.

"Look here, Lucy. We can't go on like this. It

isn't endurable. I'm ready if you are. The sooner we cut the painter and get off, the better. To-morrow, if you can manage it."

" To-morrow," she brooded.

He felt a rush of impatience. She might make a good traveller, but she would be a precious slow one. Everything would have to be done with order and reason. Not like Claire, who was ready at a moment's notice to dash off to the most absurd places—hat-boxes and all. That time they had set off for Cairo, for instance; and landed in Honolulu.

He heard Lucy's voice—warm, maternal, a trifle flat sounding perhaps. Oh, he loved her deeply, deeply. A true friend. No man could ask more. Still, a true friend ought not to run off with a friend's husband.

" Are you sure, Digby, that you want to go? "

" Do you think I am the sort of man to change my mind? " he asked sternly.

" I'll let you know," she considered. " I'll write you. You'll get my letter to-morrow morning. Don't plan anything till then."

" Oh, well," he muttered. " Why should we make such a fuss? We can buy things on our way."

Her kindly mouth tightened a little. He was a dear, dear fellow. Just the husband for happy, light-hearted Claire. But a trifle obtuse—insensitive. He couldn't see what she was giving up. Not her reputation, her place in the world; that didn't matter. But Claire—Claire's love. People never believed how dear women could be to one another. Claire had been something wonderful in her life—an exquisite, serene and sunny

refuge of understanding, that would have been stronger than death or separation. Even if they had never seen each other again it wouldn't have mattered. But now this had happened—this stupid, awful, silly catastrophe —and everything would be spoiled. Digby would stand between them like a sword cutting off their very thoughts from each other.

She stole a quick glance at her companion. She had a sudden quite primitive impulse to hit him. He looked so handsome and assured, as though he were convinced that any sacrifice would be worth while.

She wanted to tell him: "My dear, as far as I'm concerned you're not worth one of her shoe-laces," and then go up to Claire and put her arms over her shoulder and say: "Let's begin all over again. It's been too silly. Let's forget the tiresome fellow."

She caught Claire's eyes. She thought that there was something half wistful, half pleading in their momentary steadiness. Perhaps she was thinking, too: "How silly!"

"I think I'll go now," Lucy said.

"I'll walk with you to the gate," Digby returned courteously.

They strode over the thick, deep lawn in bleak silence. They shook hands.

"To-morrow, I suppose, I shall have to kiss him," Lucy thought.

They had never kissed each other.

"I wonder if she always wears such unbecoming hats," Digby reflected. Aloud he said in a harsh undertone: "Don't keep me waiting, Lucy."

"I shall write to-night."

" I can't stick it much longer. And it isn't fair to Claire."

She walked on a few steps, and then stopped, leaning reflectively on her parasol.

" She doesn't love him," she said.

" Doesn't—what? "

" Not now. It just happens that there are some people who are nice to die with. You don't necessarily want to live with them."

" Lucy——"

She nodded over her shoulder.

" You're a dear child, Digby, but very stupid. I'll write."

He stared after her till she turned the corner of the lane. He didn't know what she meant. His brain reeled. But he felt that under given circumstances he might conceivably stop hating her.

Claire had watched the two go off side by side through the dusk. She knew that Digby was frightfully unhappy by the droop of his shoulders, which had never drooped. She wondered why that custom-house official had come into his mind from nowhere, as it seemed. Unless, of course, he had been planning things with Lucy. Nothing was more likely. And yet—— He could hardly have forgotten something else; something that had happened afterwards, when the laughter had passed over them like a happy wind —how they had sat, hand in hand, watching the dawn break, thanking God secretly in a light-hearted, awe-struck gratitude—for being so happy with each other.

He wouldn't laugh much with Lucy. Lucy was

serious-minded at bottom. Her sense of humour was quiet and elderly. She had been born elderly. Claire felt that Digby and she had been born hopelessly and incurably young. That was why Lucy had been so precious to them both.

His wonderful, jolly laughter—the gay, wonderful days! Supposing she had never been ill—— It would have been then as he said—they would have grown old side by side, kept step. They would have learned whatever life had to teach them of pain and death together.

Well, what had happened had happened. You couldn't go back. You had to go on.

She made Stephen Rosslyn stand quite close to her; she seemed to be talking lightly to him.

"You see, I am strong enough. Meet me at the station to-morrow. The seven o'clock express. We can't wait. It isn't decent."

He nodded, but did not answer. His face was without colour or expression. He felt like a wild beast that had been caught and made into an exhibition for a crowd of fools. He hated them all. He wanted to kill them. But also he was afraid. He wanted frantically to escape. And he knew that there was no escape possible.

Digby drifted back into the group, and Claire stood up. She gave her hand to those nearest her. Her voice was a little breathless.

"You mustn't mind my going. It's been wonderful. A real coming back to life. But now I'm tired."

"When you have been away——" someone began.

" Ah, that will be a second honeymoon," another voice broke in teasingly. " You will have begun all over again."

Through the dusk their eyes met. And suddenly Claire heard herself laugh—just as she had done before —only not bitterly, nor ironically, but with an irrepressible sense of all the joy of life.

" That will be worth dying for," she said.

VIII

Digby waited at the gate long after the last guest had gone. Then he walked slowly back. It was dark now, with the velvet, unreal darkness of a summer's night. The chairs and tables had been left just as they were, and he picked out Claire's place and stood still, staring at it as though he expected to see her ghost. He came closer. He found himself touching the wicker arm, timidly at first and then in an agony of tenderness. He said her name aloud. He didn't care. The world might know. He loved her. He loved her as he had never loved her. And it was too late. They were being torn from each other.

Her lighted window sent a square of shining green on to the black grass. Its brightness hurt him like a knife in the heart. It made him feel utterly outcast. How often before their marriage he had paced, a gallant, reckless lover, beneath her window and looked up, thinking: " One day! " And now she was going.

Another man—that drear, mannerless little upstart, Rosslyn—would take his place, would wait, as he had once waited in a tropic garden, for her signal; would hear her beloved voice, her beloved laughter.

He walked up and down, up and down. Why, she had laughed to-night—suddenly, at her own thoughts. She had looked at him. It had been too dark to read her eyes. And yet——

The air was thick with the scent of flowers. He felt crazed with its sweetness. His heart pounded in his breast with pain, with a gathering fury. He would kill Rosslyn—Lucy—himself—everyone; there should be an awful holocaust.

There was no escape. None. As a man of honour, he had to go. Even now Lucy might be writing.

Lucy! He stopped short. What had she meant? Why had she told him? There had been something peculiar in Lucy's manner. Was it possible? It couldn't be! Lucy was desperately in love. At least—she had said so. Once. Not desperately perhaps. It couldn't be that she too——

He put his hands to his head.

The light had gone out. He stared up, breathless, expectant. He could almost feel her behind the darkness. His hands dropped, clenched, to his side.

Lucy had said: "She doesn't love him." Lucy was wise. Lucy was their friend. If it was true, then Claire, too, was going because she, too, was a person of honour. Even Rosslyn himself, ill-bred beggar that he was, might be a victim.

And if Claire didn't love Rosslyn, then whom did

she love? She loved someone. Love had been in that laugh—in that low-spoken sentence.

"Worth dying for."

Why had it been so dark that he had not read her eyes? Then he would have known. And to-morrow it would be too late.

He made up his mind. He would see her—now. He would tell her the truth. He did not love Lucy. He was not going with her. He couldn't. There was no code existent that forced a man to be unfaithful to his wife. He would go away—alone—for ever—to the ends of the earth.

He turned to the door. Then a thought seized him—daring, reckless, neck or nothing. Her window overlooked a porch. He was young enough still—more than enough in love—and a lover by instinct.

The moon came up over the trees and watched him. There was no sound in the whole world, listening and agape, but the tearing of the ivy under his groping hands. At any moment he might be made ridiculous for ever—a man burgling his own house with the front door wide open, laying infatuated siege to his own wife! He didn't care. No lover had ever cared.

He reached her window. He sat on her sill, balancing himself, hushing his broken breath. He could just see her, faint as a wraith. The moon threw his own shadow, black and strong, on the silver floor.

"Claire."

He knew suddenly that he would not go alone.

She had been waiting for him.

A little laugh gathered in his throat. He leaned towards her, whispering, like a conspirator.

" There's a train—to-morrow—early—for Timbuktu. They'll never catch us. Sweetheart, won't you run away with me? "

VI

BRAVO, TORO !

VI

BRÁVO, TORO!

I

The four grew up together. Don Jaime was both the youngest and the eldest. The other three, Luis, Pepé and Juana, were fifteen, fourteen and thirteen when he was born, but, on the other hand, the day-old Don Jaime stood up strong and straight, and two months later he could outrun Luis, and would have butted him over, if Luis had not stepped lightly aside at the last moment.

Not that Don Jaime meant any harm. As he swung about, he would look at Luis with a sulky laughter in his red eyes. It was a game, and Don Jaime, who was young, understood games. Better than the other three. Perhaps because he was never hungry. All he knew of life was bounded by the Duke d'Alvarez's rich, sun-scorched savanna where he and his mother, the famous Anita, who had brought more great bulls into the world than any other cow, browsed peacefully with the rest of the Duke's herd.

Perhaps, too, he knew that he was set apart. The herdsmen on their miserable horses kept special guard

over him, driving him wherever the pasture was richest. They watched the broadening of his great frame with grave, appraising eyes. When he was sick with some poisonous weed, a veterinary was sent for from Toledo, and Luis and Pepé sat up all night in the dark shed ministering to him. And once the Duke himself, who feared God and the saints and loved his cattle and nothing else on earth, came to see him. A herdsman dug his goad into Don Jaime's flank to show his mettle, and with a small, absurd snort and a vicious toss of the head Don Jaime sent his tormentor flying. Whereat the Duke smiled palely.

" He will make a great bull," he said. " I dedicate him to Corpus Christi five years hence."

And went away with only a careless glance at the rest of his great herd.

Pepé and Luis were the youngest herdsmen. Their village grew out of a spur of the Guadarrama Mountains that jutted into the vast plains beneath the Escorial. It was built of the same iron-grey rock, so that even from near at hand it was difficult to believe that it was there at all. The streets were narrow and steep, so that only donkeys could carry their staggering burdens to the Plaza Major—a forlorn square around which a fortified church and some old palaces, adorned with splendid armorial bearings, crumbled to ruins.

In the summer the village withered under a remorseless sun. In the winter terrible winds from the Castilian plains cut through the twisted streets. The people were always hungry and rotted by strange diseases that they accepted with a dark fanaticism. When Conchita, the aunt and guardian of Luis and Pepé,

grew blind with some hideous product of the dust, she took her trouble to the splendid Virgin who, from a glow of gold and precious stones, looked down on the gaunt priest and his scarecrow flock. And when it seemed that La Vierge turned a deaf ear to Conchita's mutterings, Conchita bore her no ill-will. God loved suffering, and Conchita felt that she understood God and was glad, in her humble way, to afford Him pleasure.

Luis and Pepé were cousins and playfellows, but not friends. If it had not been for Juana, they would never have played together. But Juana wanted to play with both of them. She would bring their food down to the shadow of the rocks, where they and their herd took shelter from the midday heat, and would stay with them till the long *siesta* was over. Juana was different. She was fair and blue-eyed, with some distant alien blood showing its colour under the smooth skin. The villagers spoke of her and her mother as foreigners. They did not like them. They were angry with them because, when she could, Juana's mother would throw scraps to the mad-eyed, spectral dogs that prowled the streets.

" Are animals Christians that she should throw Christian food to them? " they demanded bitterly.

And once Juana had flown at the muleteer, José Carres, and beaten him with her fists because of the blood dripping from his mule's neck. José, who was a kindly, good-natured man, had only laughed, but Luis had teased her for weeks afterwards, bringing her birds with their eyes picked out, just to see her stamp with rage. But when he saw her cry he was sorry, though

without understanding. For in a puzzled, half-resentful fashion he loved her and meant that she should be his wife.

Pepé was undersized, with a pleasant, wizened face, out of which the brown eyes could twinkle a friendly merriment. They were more often perplexed like those of a sad young monkey. When Luis threw his hapless victims carelessly aside, Pepé put them out of their misery. It made him sick, but it was all he could do for them. And for Juana.

Pepé wasn't much good to anyone. When he had a chance he would go to the priest's house and learn to read and write. He was always scribbling on odd bits of paper, because he could never say what he thought, and his thoughts were like the waves of a wild sea beating backwards and forwards in a narrow inlet.

Luis was slender and beautifully grown. He had the grave aristocratic features of an old Castilian. He, too, knew that he was set apart. Ever since Pedro Castro, the ex-*torero*, had taken him to a small *corrida* at a neighbouring town, he had known. At dusk, in the Plaza Major, he rehearsed his destiny. His playfellows were the bulls, and as they charged him, each in his turn, he would step aside and deliver the *descabello de pulso* with a deliberate grace. Once only he made Pepé play *toro* for him. Juana was there, watching with the other girls from the thick shadow of the trees. Though Pepé was small and delicate, he was very agile. And gradually there came into the mimic struggle something that he did not understand. It was as though amidst them all he felt himself alone,

and baffled and tormented. He felt that he was being fooled by a force that in his innermost soul he despised. And Juana's blue eyes were watching him. And suddenly, his small face twisted with this strange, unreasoning emotion, he charged—not the mocking cloak, but Luis himself. And Luis, taken by surprise, went down in a cloud of dust.

He stood up instantly. He was livid. His boy's voice sounded harsh and broken.

" You did wrong," he stammered. " Bulls don't do that—never—never—never——"

" They might," Pepé answered with the shameful tears wet on his cheeks. " They might——"

" They don't. You are a bad bull. Now I will kill you."

And this time Pepé stood still with lowered head, waiting for the death-blow. He was the bull: he was panting, weary, bewildered. And when Luis, with his *espada* levelled straight from the eyes, leapt at him, he felt the sharp point strike between the shoulders and plunge deep down into his body, piercing its way through his lungs and his very heart. He felt the agony—the red, mounting weakness. The blood poured to his nostrils and he blundered to his knees, and thence to a motionless, unconscious heap.

It was a dreadful thing. Afterwards even Juana, who was ordinarily so gentle to him, would not look at him. And Luis was cold and haughty. He could not forget that Pepé had knocked him down, and he was ashamed of a blood-relation who had fainted at the thought of pain.

When it grew too dark for games, Luis would slip

into the Fonda, where his friend, the ex-*torero*, sat playing dominoes, and sometimes breaking into harsh, vigorous speech. He would tell of the greatest day of his life when the Madrid crowd had risen *en masse* to him, tossing their hats and coats into the ring, whilst he had stood triumphant with the bull's ear in his lifted hand.

Those were other days. Castro had lived unwisely; now he had crept back to his village, broken and forgotten by the merciless crowd. But he could still talk. And when Luis was there crouched breathless in the shadow, he would talk better, his blood warming under the boy's ardent eyes. Suddenly he would stand up like a re-kindled torch, slim and erect, and the foul beggar's rags would fall away, and in the fluttering candle-light Luis saw the glitter of gold and red: he heard the roar of cheering. He saw himself: and Juana, from her box, bending towards him.

II

Don Jaime had no thoughts—only sensations that were like thoughts. . . . The smell of the rich grass, the soft warmth of the early sun, the cool shadows, and when the wind blew, the comfort of his mother's great, sheltering body—these things came and went through his days as dreams glide through the mind of a sleeper on the verge of waking. And when his mother vanished for ever—that, too, was a new sensation. He sought for her all day, and at nightfall his small,

plaintive bellowing sounded in Pepé's ears like the inarticulate crying of a whole sorrowful world.

It was then in his loneliness that he began to feel people. He became aware of the two herdsmen on horseback who stood about his life like enigmatic, ominous shadows. They were connected in his consciousness with pain and a red, strange force in himself. One day the youngest of them had goaded him with his lance, and he had turned, not knowing what he was about to do, and had caught the aggressor's horse beneath the girths. With one great jolt of the lowered head he had sent the wretched animal floundering in the dust. But as yet he had only stubs for horns, and his victim had staggered up, wild-eyed and panting, but unhurt.

The herdsman, though he was badly shaken, had laughed. Grim laughter. And they had talked of Don Jaime's father, who had died at the *corrida* at Pamplona after one of the most magnificent spectacles that city had ever seen.

" He will be just such another," they had said.

But the three young people were like himself. He felt their youth. When they lay in the shadow of the rocks he would come towards them and watch them with quiet, inquisitive eyes. He was like a diffident, rather sulky little boy, waiting for them to make advances. And one of them would get up and feed him with a handful of rich grass, and put her lips to his soft velvet nose.

" Dear little Toro! "

" He is not as the others are," Pepé had said one day, stumbling out of his silence. " He is friendly.

I think he understands. He remembers how we cared for him when he was sick, Luis. He is saying: 'Thank you.'"

Luis had laughed. But when Pepé stood up, too, and stroked Don Jaime gently between the aching horns so that his hand brushed against Juana's, suddenly Luis had become angry. His anger was always cold and swift like the flash of a knife. He had thrust Pepé on one side.

"You are a coward, Pepé, and would make a coward of a brave bull. Now I will show you . . ."

And the game had begun.

Don Jaime knew it well. He knew every twist and turn of it. First the cloak would be flaunted in his eyes, and he would snort and paw the earth in mimic fury. Then he would charge, tossing the cloak into the air, whilst Luis swayed lightly to one side and Juana laughed and clapped her hands.

"Bravo—bravo, Toro!"

It was a great game. They played it whenever the other men were away, minding the far-flung fringes of the herd. Don Jaime played it as a puppy plays with other puppies, roughly, but without anger and with an unconscious carefulness. He knew two things. He knew that the cloak was not the man. And the man was his friend.

Pepé and Juana watched together. And Juana's blue eyes grew brighter and clearer like deep water in sunlight. She loved it when Luis stood before her, his shabby *boina* in hand, and dedicated Don Jaime's life to her. His austere, proud gesture made her feel like a princess to whom the prince swears service before an

applauding multitude. She felt rich and beautiful. She loved to watch him as he rose on tip-toe—as Castro had taught him—swaying his lithe body to a curve, so that Don Jaime flashed past with not a hair's breadth to spare. His body was like fine steel, quivering and tense, in the hand of a master swordsman.

And when at last Don Jaime, wearied and a little baffled, would stand passive, with lowered head, Luis delivered the death-blow, gravely, unerringly, like a high priest performing the last rite of a solemn ceremonial.

But the *espada* was only a herdsman's staff. Don Jaime would shake his shoulders under the pin-prick and canter off in a cloud of laughing dust.

"Bravo, Toro! Bravo, Luis!"

And Luis would stand before Juana, one hand lifted, one hand rested on his thigh, in the stereotyped attitude of careless, graceful triumph.

But Pepé had seen the blood well up in Don Jaime's nostrils. He had seen death. And each time that the end came he would look away, his small brown face puckered—the laughter quenched in the brown eyes.

"Why do you look away?" Luis once asked. "Are you afraid that you will grow faint again like a girl?"

"I am a girl," Juana said indignantly, "and I have never fainted."

"He is our friend," Pepé stammered back, "and you teach him how he will be killed."

"And he is teaching me to be the greatest *espada* in Spain," Luis retorted. "And he knows nothing."

"He knows that it is a game. He knows that we are friends. He could kill you. You would kill him."

" Animals are not friends. And he could not kill me; I am too quick. He is stupid. A stupid bull. And you are a poor thing, Pepé. I do not know how it can be that the same blood runs in both of us."

Luis threw himself down at Juana's side and the three ate their dry bread together in silence. The truce was broken. Juana dared not look at either of them. She was frightened and sorrowful. . . . She did not quite know why.

Presently old Fernando, the village beggar, came groping his way towards them, holding out his bowl and tinkling his little bell.

" Alms, for the love of God——"

Luis gave him his bread.

And now Juana looked at him. She was smiling with a gratitude that she understood as little as her grief. She could have kissed his hands.

" But, Luis, you will be hungry."

He smiled gravely down at her.

" No man can enter Heaven without a beggar to call him friend," he said. " Come, Juana."

She rose and walked beside him up the rocky path towards the village. They had forgotten Pepé, and he did not follow them. He went over to where Don Jaime stood browsing peacefully amidst the withered grass, and laid his head against the silken neck. And he was blind with tears.

III

And so the months passed. And a change came. Don Jaime, who had no thoughts, did not understand

the change. Only that he was tormented by a restless, unsatisfied hunger that made him easily resentful—easily angered. Sometimes at evening he would stand alone, amidst the herd of passionless, harmless bullocks who had become his companions and unconscious guardians, and with lifted head send out a terrible, thundering call that seemed to reach the very crest of the black mountains—that sounded in Pepé's ears like the inarticulate crying of his own beaten and baffled thoughts.

Even in these days Don Jaime was magnificent—red, glittering, with the great muscles rolling under the sleek, satin cuirass of his hide.

He was three years old when they sent him to the Novilladas at Pamplona.

Juana cried as the herd passed down the dusty road. And Pepé, the inarticulate who understood, slipped his hand into hers. But Luis's face was set with pride and bitterness. For he was very poor. Pamplona was a long way off. And as yet no one knew, except Castro, that he was to be the greatest *torero* in Spain.

IV

The winter before had been such as no one living remembered. And when the summer came and with it a strange, virulent fever, the village met it without resistance. Every day men bearing a rough, black coffin toiled up the narrow, cobbled street that twisted from the church door to the walled cemetery on the top of the hill. Behind the coffin stumbled the gaunt priest

and wide-eyed little acolytes with their dirty *sotanas* stained with candle-grease, and behind them again a straggling procession of silent men and women. On the way they passed houses from which hung a small red flag, marking the spot where death would strike next.

There was no doctor. They did not need one. If the Virgin did not intercede for them, then human help availed nothing. And, indeed, death and pain and hunger were a part of life.

But Pepé saw Death as the embodiment of all cruelty. He saw it stalking the breathless, mourning streets at the heels of the bleeding, sweating mules, and the terrible dogs with their mad eyes and staring ribs. He wrote what he saw on a scrap of paper, and the thing fell into a sort of unconscious, passionate rhythm over which the priest shook his head sadly.

" It is no good to kick against the pricks, Pepé," he said. " I know—it is the way of youth. But youth passes. We grow older and wiser. We see that we cannot fight against God's inexorable will. If we do not always understand it, we must wait patiently until we do. Still "—he sighed a little, touching Pepé's work with dirty, reverent fingers—" it is poetry, Pepé —poetry."

And all that day Pepé went about like a man who has found his way out of prison—whose head has broken through a deadly, smothering cloud into sunshine. . . .

Conchita died that night. Very quietly. She stretched herself out, sighed a little, and crossed her bony hands over her breast. Even in death she knew

how to behave like a good Christian. Pepé drew the sheet over her face. There was a candle burning on the chair beside her, and he looked up and saw Luis on the other side of the bed, watching him. They crossed themselves. And with that sign it seemed that they both acknowledged the breaking of the last tie between them.

Pepé took the candle and went down the steep stone steps to the lower room. A small heap of charcoal glowed dully on the square, open hearth where the dying Conchita, who knew no pity even for herself, had tried to prepare a last meal for them. It threw a red, stifling glare on to the whitewashed walls, and into the corners, shadows that were hot as burnt-out embers. Pepé set down his candle. Over its yellow spear-point the two young men resumed the stern scrutiny that was like a passage of arms.

" What is it you want of me, Luis? " Pepé asked.

Luis threw his knife on the table.

" Lay yours beside mine," he said, " then neither will have the advantage."

But Pepé looked from the knife to Luis and made no movement.

" You are thinking of Juana, aren't you, Luis? "

" As you are."

" You want us to fight—one of us to kill the other? "

" We have always been enemies. It is the best way."

Pepé took the knife by the blade and put it back into Luis's hands.

" No," he said.

Luis struck him across the face.

" Now! " he exclaimed exultantly.

Pepé closed his eyes a moment. But his hands had not even clenched themselves, and his face, for all the red stain spreading across the cheek, wore an expression of sorrowful serenity. Ever since his mind had found the relief of words a strange thing had come to him—an understanding that was compassion. Anger had died in him. Grief and loss remained. But they, too, seemed like friends bearing him between them to some high place of vision.

"No!" he said. "You can kill me, Luis. But it would mean nothing . . ."

"You won't? I might have known. You are a coward, Pepé. . . ."

"You will always think of it like that," Pepé answered sadly. "But I think it is for her to choose."

Luis thrust his knife back into its sheath. He looked superb in his youth and contemptuous pride.

"Very well. Ask her. She is waiting for one of us by the ramparts."

Pepé went out silently. The heat outside was worse than in the house—sickly, evil heat, that tasted of corruption. The moonlight lay like a blight of leprosy on the crumbling walls of the old houses. Usually the night streets were clamorous with playing children and the shrill, harsh voices of the women. Now everything was hushed under a pall of death-like resignation. Here and there in the lightless doorways were the motionless shadows of men and women waiting hopelessly. A wretched dog, nosing a heap of offal, sped before Pepé like a ghost, into the black maw of a side street.

At the bottom of the church steps was a wide, walled-

in space. There the villagers held their yearly *fiesta*. There, in other days, they had awaited the approach of their great enemy, against whose infidel force they had held the battered walls and ancient church, inviolate. Their bodies had been the ramparts of Christendom. A gaunt crucifix stood up straight and heroic on the spot where the invader had been thrown back for the last time.

In those days they had learnt to suffer and to forget pity.

Juana waited under the shadow of the crucifix. Not docilely. For as she saw Pepé she cried out—with her hand to her mouth: "Luis—Luis!"

Pepé shook his head.

"It's all right. Don't be frightened, Juana. He is safe. You see, I would not fight. . . ."

Even then, through her thankfulness, he could feel her pitying contempt for him. He stood quietly beside her. The ancient plains where his race had been born in suffering lay under a transparent veil of moonlight. He could see everything. He understood. Even his own people who had rejected him. He understood Luis—the last heroic figure of a heroic age that had crumbled and grown meaningless, as the noble armorial bearings on the great houses had crumbled, losing even their memories.

He thought: "If I could tell her everything I see! If I could show her a new Spain—a new courage and a new greatness. . . ."

And for a moment his hand fumbled at the poem which he carried in his breast. But then it fell away hopelessly. For he saw that she was looking at him—

that there were even tears in her eyes—but that her deeper vision went beyond him into the shadow—seeking.

So he said instead: "I am going away, Juana. I have come to say 'good-bye.'"

And she gave him her hand, sobbing convulsively. And he turned and went down the street, past his home, through the black gates of the old wall, out on to the open road.

V

Up the steep hill which leads from the main gateway to the Plaza Major came a roaring stream of cars, their exhausts open; mile-carts, peasants on horseback, and townsfolk, swallowing as best they could the clouds of dust that rose under the wheels and hoofs of the never-ending procession. In the Plaza Major itself the procession broke up. The cars with their loads of tourists and well-to-do Spaniards swung off down a narrow street to the Hôtel Universal. The rest mingled with the after-*siesta* loungers—cadets in their smart, grey uniforms, officers, priests, high-heeled women with cheap mantillas over their sleek, shingled heads, hard-faced peasants from the Plains, and here and there arrogant-looking fellows with a neat pig-tail visible under the hard brim of their high-crowned hats. Workmen were busy with the awnings that were to shield the next day's procession from the June sun. There were children everywhere, wide-eyed and curious, like spectators of a life to which they did not yet quite belong.

To the young man seated alone at a table in front of one of the smaller cafés, the passers-by were like the notes of an old song which had been sung so often that the charm had gone from it, and even to the singers it had become flat and wearisome. "If only someone would give them a new song," he thought. Though he was a shabby young fellow, the women strolling past arm-in-arm glanced at him curiously. For there was something different about him. He met the glances of their dark enigmatic eyes without insolence or innuendo. And there was an innocent friendliness in his expression—a look at once courageous and diffident, that made them smile a little.

"It is a pity that he is alone," they thought.

He drank his coffee slowly, for it was all he could afford and he didn't want to move. The shifting kaleidoscope was being re-born into words behind his bright eyes—as yet confused, but beating themselves into line and rhythm. In this passion of creation he could forget everything, even loneliness.

A woman came out of a side-street. She was dressed like the majority of the women, in neat, sober black, but she was alone and her hair gleamed like pale sunlight through the web of her cheap mantilla. The men stared inquisitively at her fairness. But she seemed unaware of them. Her face was sad and aloof as the face of a Madonna on a dim, gold Spanish retable. But as she passed the young man and he sprang up with a stifled exclamation, her composure broke like the quiet surface of a pool under a breath of sudden wind.

"Pepé!"

"Juana!"

He could have controlled his trembling better if he hadn't seen the tears spring to her eyes—sudden tears that must have been too near the surface. And her smile was at the same time so sad, so joyous—so almost grateful that he didn't dare think—couldn't think, in fact, but just stood there, gazing at her with all eyes.

"Dear Pepé . . . !"

"Why, it's wonderful—like a miracle. Wait—sit down with me a little while."

"No, No—it wouldn't do. People would think——"

"Let them think! I might be your brother. I almost am."

She shook her head, looking about her timidly, and drawing her mantilla closer about her face.

"Come with me instead, Pepé. Come home with me. We have so much to talk about. And I can show you—my little Juan . . ."

He walked beside her, keeping close in spite of the crowd. He was still hat in hand. The soft brim would be spoilt for ever in that tense unconscious grip.

"Little Juan? I didn't know——"

"Yes. He will be two years old to-morrow."

"You—you must be very proud and happy."

Her eyes were fixed steadily in front of her.

"He is wonderful. He is like Luis—like Luis when he was a little boy. It will make you laugh."

"Luis must be proud, too."

"Ah, Mother of God—so proud. . . !"

He didn't understand. He might have thought he had heard a cry of pain and protest. But he couldn't think clearly. It was hard enough to talk quietly and naturally of things that were like knives in his breast. He could only do it by loving her more than he had ever loved her.

They turned down a narrow street into the dark vestibule of a peasant's *guarida*. From the stone steps that led up out of the turmoil of tethered mules and cattle she glanced back at him.

"It isn't a home, Pepé. We wander about, you see. After to-morrow we shall be gone again."

He followed in silence. He knew the room of old. The whitewashed walls, the shining floors, the big white bed in the alcove, the poverty and grim cleanliness were familiar to his experience. His eyes passed these things to the child—standing there, so big, so strong—as she had said—so absurdly like Luis.

It ran to meet Juana, and she lifted it in her arms, holding it with its small dark face pressed against her breast.

"This is home," she said almost with defiance.

Little Juan peeped out, laughing, and Pepé kissed the chubby, extended hand. He knew then by the rush of tenderness to his heart, that he had accepted everything.

"He is yours, too, Juana."

"Yes," she said with an odd sternness; "he is mine, too."

After a moment he asked for Luis.

And she answered in the same tone, calmly without

expression: "He is down at the Plaza de Toros. They are getting ready for to-morrow. You see, we go from town to town—wherever there is a *corrida*. It was Castro who got him his work here."

"I didn't know," Pepé stammered. "I—I don't read these things. Perhaps Luis is already the great *espada* . . ."

"No—oh, no. It isn't so easy. Luis says the older men are jealous. They try to keep the new men out. Once he had a chance at Cuenca—just as *chulo*. But his cape-work made them angry and they wouldn't let him go on, though the people were clamouring for him. Here he is just a *muletero*. He says it doesn't matter. One day his real chance will come."

Pepé nodded comfortingly.

"I'm sure that's true, dear Juana. It's written in his stars. One day the people will be throwing their hats in the ring for him—just as he said."

By chance he looked at her—suddenly, so that it was too late for her to hide.

"Juana," he cried out, "what is it? What have I done? What have I said to hurt you? Don't you believe it's true?"

"Yes—I believe it. I know it . . ."

"Then why . . . ? What is it? Won't you be the happiest, proudest woman in Spain?" He tried to laugh. "You'll have a fine carriage to ride in—you and little Juan—and one day you will come back to our village and everyone will turn out to welcome you. . . ."

She put the child down, caressing it tenderly. But even when she looked up her face was still ravaged.

"Pepé—then it will be for always—always. Why didn't I know? Why didn't you tell me, Pepé?"

"What could I have told you?"

She clasped her hands wildly.

"The horses, Pepé—the horses—the blood—the cruelty. . . . Don't you remember little Don Jaime, Pepé? How we played together? How he loved us and life? I have seen him killed a hundred times. I have seen the sword go into his body—not killing him all at once—but slowly—hideously. I have seen him go down on his poor knees and the blood in his nostrils . . ."

"Juana! You don't need to see these things——"

"I do. I must. He makes me. He doesn't understand. We are like two people who cannot hear each other. He thinks I'm ashamed of his failure. He is jealous because—oh, God knows! And I must take the boy with me so that when the day comes he shall see his father—so that he, too, shall become a great *espada*. I hide the child's eyes. And when Luis sees that, he grows mad with anger——" She checked herself. He saw that she had only spoken out of a long, bitter silence. And now she was ashamed.

He took a step towards her. He kept his hands clenched so that he should not touch her. He could bear her happiness. It had been strong ground for him to stand on. But now that ground was slipping under his feet.

"Juana—doesn't he love you?"

"Terribly," she answered.

That one word stupefied him. He hadn't thought that love might be terrible. His own love had been

different. It had hurt no one—not even his real self. He could only stand there helpless, with a confused and baffled sorrow.

It was she who regained her courage first. She opened a drawer in the bare table.

"Don't let's talk any more about me, Pepé. Youth makes the bed on which old age must sleep. Let's talk about you. You are a great man now, Pepé."

"No—no! Only a poor one."

"Perhaps. But I have heard people talk. Even simple people drinking in the Fonda. And I found this. Someone said you had written it, and I cut it from the paper. I kept it till I had learned to read it."

He took the scrap of paper from her hand. It was the poem he had written on the day of Conchita's death. The paper had worn thin and had been mended.

"You learned to read—for that?"

She smiled wistfully.

"I was very slow and stupid. A priest gave me a book to help me. I had to spell out each word. And even then I didn't understand. But now I think I do."

"Juana, I wanted to read it to you—the night I went away."

"Why didn't you, Pepé?"

He laid the paper back on the table, saying in a low voice: "I knew it was of no good."

"It's true, dear Pepé. I wouldn't have listened. I was waiting for Luis. My ears were waiting for his footsteps. I was impatient with you. I thought

you were weak and cowardly, as Luis said. I think now perhaps you are the bravest of us all." She added in a broken whisper: "You were always gentle with poor, hurt things, Pepé—I ask your pardon."

Their eyes met. But he was not deceived by what he saw in hers. The little Juan clasped her hand and stood staring thoughtfully at the stranger, and when she drew him closer, Pepé knew that he was already answered. And indeed he would not have spoken. For by the law of God which bound them both she was Luis's wife.

He turned blindly away.

"I pray that you may be blessed and happy yet, Juana," he said.

The door opened and Luis stood on the threshold, looking from one to the other. He wore rough blue overalls, dusty and sand-stained. But he had grown handsomer. The life that burnt in him had wrought his body to an even greater perfection. He was hard and lean and supple as a panther. And there was something in his eyes which, for all their arrogance, touched Pepé like a defiant sorrow.

Pepé took a step forward.

"Juana and I met on the Plaza," he said. "Juana brought me back to see you both."

The two young men shook hands. But Pepé felt in the tense, steely clasp not friendliness, but an ironical warning.

"Welcome. This is a poor place—not such as you smart writing people are accustomed to. But other days are coming. Is it not true, *niño*?"

The child ran to him. Luis dodged in mock *torero*

fashion, and little Juan, foreseeing the movement, seized on him, crowing in triumph.

"Aha, little *toro,* you mustn't be so clever! You see—we begin early. He will have the advantage of a famous father. He will not have to struggle as I have done. What are you two staring at? Perhaps you don't believe that, eh? Well, you will see. . . ."

Pepé hung his head.

"I'm sure. Of course. You always got what you wanted, Luis. Well—I must be going. God go with you, Juana!"

"And with you, Pepé!"

He dared not look at her again.

Luis went down the stairs with him to the doorway. There they paused like people who have still something vital to say to one another. Pepé could feel the other's eyes measuring him with a hot intensity.

"So—you have become a great fellow, Pepé, eh?"

"Not great, Luis. I have written a poem or two. And now I am working for a Madrid paper."

"Perhaps we shall meet again. Perhaps to-morrow at the *corrida*?"

"No, not there."

"Not even to see Juana? And Don Jaime? That would be curious, wouldn't it? The four of us. Perhaps something might happen—something interesting . . ."

Pepé had looked up.

"Don Jaime?"

"Yes. They kept him back a year. He is full grown; he is something to look at now, I can tell you. A strange fellow. When I drove him into the *toril,*

he recognized me. He put his muzzle into my breast like a big dog. But with the others he is dangerous. He will make a great spectacle. You should come, Pepé. Juana will be sitting in the best place in the *sombra* where the *espada's* wife should sit. I haven't told her about Don Jaime. That will be a surprise. She pretends not to like the *corridas*. She must have some of your thin blood in her, Pepé. Well, I am squeezing it out, drop by drop. And the day she sees me kill my first bull—so!—with one swift thrust—and the crowd rise to me—it will be gone for ever—and you with it."

"I never counted," Pepé said in a low voice. "Why do you speak so angrily?"

"I'm not angry. Why should I be? But I'm telling you to keep away from her. I don't choose to fight you for her a second time."

Pepé looked at the gaunt young face beside him. He remembered their lives together when they had been children. He remembered how Luis had given his bread to the beggar, with so much knightly grace that one had thought of the St. Martin whose figure loomed out of the brown shadows of his altar-piece.

And Pepé was moved by an odd compassion and grief, so that he said very gently: "I never fought you, Luis."

"No. If you had, I would have beaten you. I should never have had to think of you again. I will not think of you. You are like a poison. Be gone from here!"

Without a word more he swung round and went back up the dark steps. He was angry and unhappy—

as he so often was—without knowing why. He had wanted to strike Pepé—uselessly and foolishly. The fellow wouldn't fight—wasn't worth fighting. And there was no reason. Juana was his wife. When she saw him, glorious in gold and scarlet, standing alone in the great arena with the crowd rising to him like one man, the baffling cloud between them would be gone. . . . No, he couldn't wait for that. . . . When he got back into their room he would take her into his arms, as he had done that first night on the ramparts, and he would feel her yield under the ecstasy of his kiss. . . . He was a man—not like poor Pepé. He knew how to take and hold what was his. . . .

But Juana was busy putting little Juan into his cot beside their big white bed, and singing to him in a small, weary, uncertain voice. Luis waited for her to look up at him. But she would not show she knew that he was there, and he began to move about restlessly, like a man seeking an escape.

"That was a strange chance—your meeting."

She did not answer.

"He hasn't changed. Town clothes don't make a man. I asked him to the *corrida* to-morrow. But he wouldn't come: not even to see you, Juana. Perhaps he was afraid of fainting again. But I have two fine places for you and the *niño*. Expensive places. But that doesn't matter: I shall be earning big money soon. And it will be the greatest *corrida* Toledo has ever seen. Why don't you speak? Are you tired with talking so much to your old friend?"

She turned at last, her eyes almost black with passion.

"I'm not going, Luis. I can't——"

"Not going? But I have bought the places—you must."

"I can't—I can't. Don't make me, Luis——"

"So! This is what Pepé has put into your mind: that poor, wincing coward who can't give a blow for a blow. Well, you are my wife. One day you will be the wife of the greatest *espada* in Spain. And you are the mother of my son. I will not have you teach him to be a coward, too."

"Luis, I have tried to tell you——"

"You tell me things that mean nothing. Lies, subterfuges. There is something else behind them all. You knew what I was. You were proud enough in those first days . . ."

She clasped her hands in an agony of self-reproach.

"I was foolish. A girl in love. I did not understand—I had not seen. Have pity on me!"

"Pity? I am going to lay the world at your feet. I am going to give you everything a woman dreams of——"

"Luis, you don't know what I dream of. Let us go back to the village—to our home——"

"You talk like a mad woman——"

"Listen, Luis. I will do anything; I will go to-morrow. Only not Juan—not the baby——"

"Ah, you think it shameful that he should see his father dragging off the carcases—like the common *muletero* that he is. Well, that is the path he must tread, too."

"No—no!"

"You are ashamed——"

"I am ashamed. Not of that. I cannot bear it, Luis." She laid her hand on her breast. "It is killing something in me. Each time something in me is done to death, too . . ."

But he did not hear her. His tormented eyes had lighted on the paper lying on the table. He seized it with avid fingers.

"What is this?"

Involuntarily she took a step towards him as though in protection.

"Nothing—a poem."

"From Pepé? A love poem—to you no doubt."

"No—no: not that. He wrote it when Conchita was dying. He was so unhappy because of all the pain and death. Luis, if you could only read it——"

He tore the thing into shreds. It seemed that at last he had the enemy's throat between his hands.

"You know I can't read. You are lying—you are making fun of me! If Pepé comes again—warn him that I will kill him. If you love him, warn him——"

She did not answer. She began wearily to spread the table for their poor meal. He watched her. He stood by the window, his arms folded, his head arrogantly lifted, his eyes hot with tears. He saw her hands tremble as she gathered together the torn shreds of paper, and his face became convulsed with a child's confusion and despair. Suddenly he flung himself on her, and tearing the fragments from her fingers, scattered them through the open window.

"Now it is gone," he stammered. "You are mine, Juana. Mother of God—you shall stay mine!"

He stood upright for a moment, tense with a brief sense of power and triumph. There was a mist before his eyes. Through it he could hear the shrill noises of the streets, and more and more clearly the sound of a woman crying. The mist cleared. He saw her then, seated by the child's bed, with her head bowed and her hands folded upon her knees.

He stumbled towards her. He knelt. He clasped her about the waist; his face burned against her breast.

"I struck you, Juana! I did not mean it. I love you. Be patient. Now I am only a poor peasant. But one day I will be the most famous man in Spain. I will kill great, fierce bulls in your honour—everyone shall see how I honour you. Love me, Juana—love me!"

But she could only lay her hand on his head, mute and helpless.

VI

The bells rang. Through the high canvas awnings the subdued sunlight seeped down on the great procession of Corpus Christi. From the balconies that were hung with bright shawls and red, rich carpets, women, clustered together like dark flowers, waved and smiled discreetly to their friends crowded against the walls of the street. The street was so narrow and steep where Pepé stood that the procession could only move at a snail's pace, with long halts and jerky starts, and when the Tabernacle of the Host passed, the people had barely room to kneel.

Behind two stately gendarmes on horseback came the religious societies with their garish banners; officers in full gala, *képi* in hand, their stout breasts loaded with orders, their faces set in dutiful gravity; cadets with presented arms, their shakos hanging by a strap at the back of their necks, less grave, their subdued, mirthful glances seeking the balconies; priests in splendid vestments; children in quaint, mediæval dress; town officials; the Ark itself drawn by crouching men, whose red, sweating faces peered out like dumb oxen from under the draped platform.

From a distance it had made a gorgeous, solemn spectacle. But now Pepé saw that the vestments were dust-stained about the hem and the lace *vottas* torn, and the priests unshaven. The officers yawned behind their hands. And he thought again of a song that had been sung too often, and of a people, docile and weary, waiting for the new singer. He seemed to see the procession winding its way down to the arena, where the day of the Lord would be celebrated by the slaughter of great bulls and horses, grown old in toil and starvation. And he felt the hot blood rise from his heart—not with anger, but with a passionate, protesting love.

Juana knelt opposite him. He had seen her by chance and followed. That much at least might be granted him. He did not mean to speak to her. But through the broken ranks of the procession he could see her. She knelt with bowed head and folded hands, and she seemed to him the embodiment of sorrow. Suddenly he crossed over to her, and as the great, gold Tabernacle rolled past, he knelt with her.

It was like a sacrament—the first and last that they would ever share together.

"Juana," he whispered, "don't go. Not to-day. They're going to kill Don Jaime. I had to warn you. It would break your heart."

He felt her shudder go through his own body.

"Thank you, dear Pepé. It is too late."

A hand laid itself on his arm. It was less like a hand than a steel vice. He did not need to look up. He did not need to hear the suffocated voice.

"Now I will make you fight me, or, by the Holy Mother of God, I will kill you like the crawling snake you are!"

Pepé did not move or answer. He thought quietly: "So be it. You will kill me then." But when he rose from his knees, Luis and Juana had both gone.

VII

Don Jaime had no thoughts. But he knew thirst and hunger. He knew fear. For twenty-four hours they had kept him without food or water. And the darkness of the *toril* was deeper than the darkness of night. It was a close, suffocating darkness.

He knew that there were other bulls near him. He smelt them. He smelt their hunger and thirst. He smelt their fear. He struck the walls that divided them with his horns, and heard their muffled answer. They were like fellow-prisoners, questioning each other. They asked: "What is happening?"

But Don Jaime did not know. As he had no

thoughts, he could not think about the future. But he could remember. There, again, it was a matter of sensation. He remembered, for instance, the touch of Juana's hand, and the relief from pain that night Pepé and Luis had sat with him and tended him. He remembered terror and anger when at the Novilladas a crowd of merrymakers had chased and tormented him down the narrow, boarded streets. He remembered the pain when a boy, braver than the rest, had stabbed him in the flank with a knife. He remembered the sensation of holding the quivering body by one horn against the wall. . . .

And he had instincts.

He knew that something was preparing beyond the darkness. He smelt it. An indefinable, new smell. He beat the walls with his horns. He heard the rustling and stamping of uneasy hoofs.

" What is it? What are they doing to us? "

All the afternoon the crowd came streaming down the hill. The dust rose in clouds. There were sellers of sweetmeat and cool drinks by the wayside, and loiterers who couldn't afford a ticket, but who had the fun of seeing carriage-loads of *espadas* and *banderilleros* and mere *picadores* roll past in state. They picked out the most famous of the *espadas* with a delighted yell.

" Aha! There goes El Passero. He will have the great bull from the Duke's herd. The best bull of the year. It will be a wonderful spectacle! "

El Passero drove alone, like a prince. His close-fitting, red-gold jacket shone gorgeously in the sunlight. He looked sullen and proud and indifferent. The

cheers gave him no pleasure. He knew that if he didn't strike home at the first thrust, they would be changed to hoots and insults. He was worrying about Pedro from Teruel—a new fellow who would be certain to make a bid for popularity at the risk of his neck. When one was young and had a name to make, one did that sort of thing. Afterwards one grew careful and the people shouted vile things at you.

He would have to see to it that this Pedro didn't get a chance.

In the Plaza de Toros every place was taken. Even in the Palcos de Sombra the occupants were jammed suffocatingly against one another. Vendors of tepid drinks trod on their feet as they scrambled past. People in the *sol* fidgeted on their hard stone benches and sweated and fanned themselves. A few cheap, garish shawls hung over the balustrades, and fat women in mantillas leant over them and gazed down stupidly at the drab-coloured crowd. The local band, blaring an interminable tango, was scarcely audible in the tumult of strident voices. But when a single trumpet sounded, there was a silence of death.

The old peasant at Pepé's side touched him on the knee.

"*Eso es.* There is the President. He wears a straw hat like a foreigner. Aha, in my day . . ."

Scarlet and yellow figures on foot and on horseback. They saluted, dispersed to their places behind the barriers. They moved stiffly, accurately, without enthusiasm, like marionettes. Two black-suited *alguaciles* trotted up to the President's box. The President threw down the key of the *toril*. But the

man who tried to catch it in his three-cornered hat failed. And at this the old peasant whistled derisively between his teeth. . . .

The trumpet again. The arena was empty now save for the *chulos* with their red capes. They stood close to the barriers, facing the black entrance to the *toril*, and waited. Suddenly a great sigh went up. And then silence again. A bull trotted out into the sunlight. He came gaily. He was like a boy released from school. But when he saw the great crowd staring down at him, he stopped short and gazed back with puzzled, stupid questioning. "What is it? What are you doing to me?"

And the crowd answered with insults. He was a small, brown bull—in the vast loneliness of the arena he seemed even smaller—and they saw at once that he was not a good bull. He was quiet and frightened. Even the flaunted cape frightened him and, after one timid charge, he turned away, his nose to the ground, snuffling for the rich, brown grass that should have been growing in all that sunlight.

And the crowd groaned.

Four stiffly padded *picadores* on lean, grotesque horses rode into the arena. The horses with their right eyes bandaged had an air of horrible jauntiness. They fidgeted uneasily. A white mare, whose side was misshapen by an old wound, had to be led up, struggling and backing, to the quietly browsing bull. The bull looked up. "What is this? What do you want with me?" And the *picador* leant out of his saddle, and with his long *garrocha* jabbed him clumsily between the shoulders. The crowd caught

its breath. Blood was flowing darkly over the brown hide. Now at last. . . .

Pepé stood up in his place. Somewhere in that vast crowd Juana was seeing what he saw. He wanted to cover her eyes with his hands—to shout a warning to her. But he could not find her. And it would have been useless. She would not save herself—she would take her part in this martyrdom.

Down below in the inner ring Luis, in his blue overalls, served the *banderilleros* with their darts. He looked up and saw Pepé, and stood still like a man suddenly turned to stone.

The brown bull put down his head. Even now he was tentative, yielding uncertainly to an old instinct. But he was very strong. The white mare, lifted clean off her feet, flung her rider headlong. She scrambled up and tried to escape, trailing her unspeakable horror, until she dropped panting, incredibly alive, and a *muletero* threw a cloth over the heaving, sobbing body.

And Pepé remembered how Juana had said: "You were always kind to poor, hurt things." And it seemed to him that they were prisoners together in an alien, hostile world, and that he could not save or comfort her.

Seven bulls. Black bulls, brown bulls, timid and angry bulls. All baffled, puzzled. They came on gleaming and vibrating with life and energy. They went out limp and hideous at the heels of a racing team of mules. And the crowd booed and cheered according to the manner of their death.

And now the eighth bull. People drew themselves up in their seats. For this was the great bull of the

corrida, and he was to fall to El Passero, who was the first *espada* of them all.

The old man at Pepé's elbow chuckled hoarsely.

"I tell you," he said, "bulls aren't stupid. Give them a second chance—teach them the game—and there'd be no more bull fights. Even now—once in a while—they learn too quickly."

Luis handed the sword to the great man. His heart felt hot and swollen. He had seen Pepé. He had seen Juana's marble face. And he had prayed at the altar of the Virgin: "This time, Mother of God, give me my chance, so that she may love me!"

VII

He was dazzled. The smell dazzled him. He smelt pain. He smelt death. An acrid, stinging smell that burnt his nostrils. He did not know that it was pain and death that he smelt. But it was as though an indecipherable message had been shot through every nerve of his body.

The people rose in their seats. They had never seen a bull like that. He was superb. Beautiful. He seemed to blaze with the whole mystery of life. And he turned slowly, magnificently, regarding them. He turned until he faced the *chulos*, standing with their red capes against the barriers and waiting. Then he stood still, considering them with an odd, calculating steadiness. They were puzzled. Less certainly than usual they advanced towards him. The boldest of them flashed his cape under the wide nostrils.

Pain and death. The sand was soaked with it. It rose into the sunlight like a foul miasma. Don Jaime took no notice of the red cape. He stood motionless, brooding. They grew bolder. And still he waited. The crowd began to laugh. All that strength and magnificence, and no more spirit than a sheep. But the old man at Pepé's side shook his head.

" That is a strange bull," he said, " a strange, terrible bull . . ."

And Pepé clenched his hands, remembering how they had played together.

The red capes flashed before Don Jaime's eyes. He had played that game long ago. He did not want to play it now. The smell engrossed him. There were ghosts, too, in this place. He saw them—dim, shadowy figures in the sunlight—horses and brother-bulls, dappled with blood and gazing at him with glazed eyes.

The people rocked and screamed.

" Coward! Shameless one . . . ! "

But the *chulos* looked at one another. The bull had not moved. He seemed to be looking at something beyond them. " Is he blind? " they asked. But they were afraid.

The first *picador* forced his horse alongside. It was queer how the contagion had spread. Both man and animal were trembling. The man, goaded by the angry shouting, leant forward and drove his *garrocha* between the great shoulders.

Pain. A dark, thin stream trickled over the red hide. Don Jaime turned. At last the message had come clear. He knew. He remembered Pamplona.

He did not charge the horse. He charged the man nearest him, who, taken unawares, slipped. There was the sound of a dull, flat impact. A thing like a black starfish turned a grotesque somersault in the sunlight and lay twisted and motionless on the sand.

And now the people sat silent—sweating. In a flash they knew what the *toreros* knew. This was a killer—a bull who saw straight—who thought!

The old man rubbed his hands.

"I told you! I told you!"

Don Jaime knew. These men meant evil to him. He charged the horse of the nearest *picador*, but when the man fell he did not turn aside as the other bulls had done. He paid no heed to the wildly flaunted capes. He gored the man where he lay, trampling him under the terrible hoofs.

And now he stood alone. The circle about him had widened. The *chulos* crouched against the barriers, gesticulating to each other and to the crowd, who screamed at them in an ecstasy of horror and joy.

"Bravo, Toro! Shameless ones! Get home to your villages!"

The men licked their dry lips. They could see the great red bull watching them. Young Pedro from Teruel waved his cape like a frightened child, and once more Don Jaime charged. Not at the cape. The boy was flung back against the barrier and held upright, impaled by one deadly horn.

Three men in ten minutes.

The first *banderillero* planted his darts. He turned and fled like a madman, his yellow legs twinkling with

a horrible absurdity. He ran backwards, dodging, his eyes seeking the barrier, his breath coming in short gasps. A *chulo* ran up, waving his cape. But Don Jaime seemed not to see him. He had shaken off the burning pain with one twist of the mighty shoulders. And now he did not hurry greatly. He did not follow his tormentor in his tortuous twistings. But he kept between him and the barrier. To the agonized spectators it was as though he played a game—wickedly, making heavy, brutish fun of the wretched man running hither and thither. And at last he caught him, within three feet of safety.

Men and women stood in their seats. They screamed at the *chulos*, who hung, wavering and baffled, by the barriers. They, too, had smelt death—their own human death—and it maddened them with rage and desire. This was the greatest bull they had ever seen. The man who killed him would be the greatest hero.

The *banderilleros* shook their heads. It was no use. Let the people scream. Better life than death. This was not the game they were paid to play. This bull knew. Somewhere this bull had learnt.

" El Passero! "

The *espada* came on alone. He ordered back the *chulos* with a curt, authoritative gesture. But those nearest saw the sweat on his dark face. They knew there could be no graceful preliminary passages. It was death at once for one or other of them. The two faced each other in the very centre of the arena. And Don Jaime watched. The doomed man could have fancied that there was scorn and irony in that red

gaze. He flaunted the *muleta* once and once only. The sword made a line of silver in the sunlight.

The old man hid his face.

"Mother of God . . . !"

And now there was only Don Jaime, standing alone in the vast arena, and the black heap ten yards away from him that did not move.

VIII

Luis swung himself over the barrier. He was in his rough blue overalls. But at last he carried the red *muleta* and the *espada* in his hand. He did not look at Don Jaime, but walked coolly to the President's box and saluted.

"I am only a *muletero*," he shouted clearly, "but I will kill this bull according to the law and to the honour of the Virgin, who heard my prayer, and to the honour of my wife, who watches me."

The President, white and uncertain, made an assenting gesture.

The tumult beat down Pepé's cry: "No, Luis—not you—not you . . . !"

The crowd shouted with joy. He was young. He was beautiful in his slender grace, in his young arrogance. He tossed his *boina* over his shoulder. He advanced to meet the red death like a bridegroom advancing to meet his bride. And indeed he was full of a sweet joy and exultancy. The hour had come for which he had lived.

Don Jaime stood quiet. He was weary. The sharp pain between his shoulders had hardened to a dull ache.

The ghosts about him had grown dim. His rage was glutted. He wanted to be at peace. Who was this man coming towards him with a step so familiar—who called to him in that low voice?

He lowered his head and the crowd gasped.

"Don Jaime! Little bull—little bull . . . !"

He scented the air. He remembered. He pawed the sand in recognition. This was his friend. All was well again. They would go back to the great pastures and browse in the steady, peaceful sunlight.

Luis laid his hand between the lowered horns.

"Now, little bull . . . !"

Nobody heard him. They could only stare down in consternation at his madness. He called again, very softly. In those red eyes he had seen recognition like a spark that kindled. He was safe. He flaunted the *muleta*. Don Jaime snorted. Here was the old game and the old friend. Though he was weary he could play still. He charged—cunningly, so that as Luis rose on tip-toe, light as a feather before a strong gust of wind, the warm terrific body swept past with not the breadth of a hair between them. Don Jaime swung round, tossing his great head. One would have said he laughed. The crowd rose in a black mass. And Luis laughed, too, back at them, showing his white teeth.

The old man mumbled: "What is this? This is a strange thing. I do not understand. The boy has magic . . ."

Pepé drove the nails into the palms of his hands. He knew the magic. He prayed. He did not know for what he prayed. He found himself whispering:

"Little Don Jaime—take care! We are traitors to you—all of us . . ."

The crowd rocked and swayed.

There had never been such a display. It was as though man and bull had rehearsed their parts. They played into each other's hands, showing off each other's tricks—the most graceful turns, the most daring passes. The great red bull was like a child now—a child playing at make-believe—tossing the red rag over his horns, snorting and pawing the sand with a blind ferocity that had had no counterpart in the silent, deadly calculation of his first onslaught.

The crowd laughed in ecstasy. This was the greatest bull, and this unknown youth the greatest *espada*. To-morrow Spain would ring with his name.

The end was near. They clamoured for it. They wearied—even of perfection. And Don Jaime was weary, too—and, as he had often been, puzzled, as though behind this game there was something hidden from him. He stood still, his great flanks heaving, his red eyes fixed interrogatively on the slender figure of his friend, drawn taut like a bow, with the silver, shining blade held straight and level to the shoulder. "What is it? What do you want of me?"

Luis gave a little nod. How good the Virgin had been! As Don Jaime lowered his head, he leapt forward and then swiftly to one side. His sword had vanished. The people could see nothing but the hilt quivering between the bull's shoulders. They rose for the last time, shouting themselves hoarse. The men's hats and cloaks dropped into the arena like shot crows.

Don Jaime tasted death. It was in his throat. It poured through his nostrils in a dark tide. He did not understand this awful, choking redness. He did not understand this pain. He blundered to his knees, crouched in a quaint attitude of prayer and humiliation. But out of the mist, gathering before the red eyes, something was rising—not a thought, but an instinct, old as death.

The *chulos* crept stealthily down upon him like vultures.

Luis turned. He held himself superbly. The shouting was glorious music in his ears. Daringly he turned to where Juana sat. She would see now that he had not boasted. She would smile at him proudly and joyfully, as she had done in those innocent days when they had played together, and love had lain like a sweet, unspoken thought between them. He would not kill Pepé now. He had already triumphed over that tormenting, unsubstantial force. He was on the very crest of life.

"Bravo—bravo, Toro!"

The old man was beating his fists together.

"Take care! Take care, I tell you!"

A woman screamed. And then a strangled silence. They were trying to shout and could not. Their voices were choked in their throats. The great red bull was rising—had risen. He stood massively behind that triumphant figure like a statue of terrific, brooding vengeance.

Luis heard the silence. He was still laughing when he turned. Too late. They saw him for a moment —upright—with his arms flung out in the attitude of

crucifixion. Then the dead bull and the man were together—locked in a terrible embrace . . .

Pepé fought his way through the surging, panic-stricken mob. He was stronger than the strongest of them. For at last he had seen Juana, with her child's face hidden against her breast.

VII

THE STRANGE STORY OF A MAN WHO BELIEVED IN GOD

VII

THE STRANGE STORY OF A MAN WHO BELIEVED IN GOD

In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid of what man can do unto me.—*Psalm lvi.*

I HAVE thought of a dozen ways of telling it. For as every writer knows it is not enough to tell the truth. Every lying newspaper report does that. Our Courts of Law insist on the truth and nothing but the truth, and so commit their own blind, well-intentioned crimes. No, when it comes to digging down into the heart of things—to revealing the verity that is above fact—one has to turn to Art, to imagination, to the power of selection. One has to find the explosion point so that light can be thrown into the farthest corner.

Thus in telling Dudley Calhoun's story, as I know it to be true, it was hard for me to choose the right moment of departure and the right method of expression. I might have told it as it came to me personally, as others saw it, and perhaps have started at the beginning with Calhoun's youth and the early days of his marriage. Even now, in this effort at fusion, I am not sure. And it is queer how responsible I feel, as though my failure would be doing some grievous harm—not to

Calhoun indeed, but to the something in him that is universal.

And then again I have asked myself if it is a story that need be told—if it serves any purpose in the telling? After all, it is not a happy story—not as we commonly understand happiness, though as to that there are many opinions—and it points no moral. It does not prove how foolish it is to be bad or how wise it is to be good. Indeed as many people will see it there is in it something disrupting to our accepted morality. But to others who are vitally concerned with this modern life of ours it may reveal just one more angle of its most poignant issue. For ours is a cruel age to live in. We are tormented by problems that would have been as incomprehensible to our ancestors—speaking in the vast terms of evolution—as they will be to our descendants. As Calhoun said on that last day of all, we are torn between the old instincts to which we owe our survival, and the new conscience which will one day father a new world and in its turn become instinctive. We are transitionary—neither quite beast nor quite man—and suffering in the flesh of both. To the man in us the Beast has become sinful. And to the Beast the Man is a puzzling torturer, demanding impossibilities, and from whom the Beast must sometime escape—if only for an hour.

Therein lies half our tragedy.

And then again we who are in such passionate need of speech are still struggling on the borderland of silence. We have invented many words but none to tell the truth of our innermost selves. And when some desperate thing happens to us and it is vital that its

whole nature should be understood, we are driven, as Calhoun was driven, to some tremendous action—criminal or heroic—as you see it.

I know this much about Dudley Calhoun's story—that if it is to have any value for you, you must believe in Dudley Calhoun, quite simply and absolutely as a child would do. As, if you cannot do that, you must accept the queer, unaccountable belief of those who judged him and of the men who eventually sent him to his death. It is of no use to approach him with the cynicism and second-hand scepticism of this age. You will find in that case nothing but the usual commonplace stuff which you have read a hundred times in the newspapers. Better to leave him alone——

And you must try to see him. Because there never was a man who looked more what he was. There again I am at a loss. For to say that he was handsome is to suggest the mere structure of the man. There is even something commonplace in the very word which denies his essential quality. He was a radiant human being. Literally he gave the effect of light and energy. I remember the first time I saw him at Oxford, striding down the High with the wind in his thick black hair and his head up, and the unconscious knightliness in the whole bearing of his slender, vigorous body. He might have been a St. George to the rescue, or better still a young St. Francis who had neither sinned nor repented.

It seemed that he had everything—beauty, health and an intellect that made his inherited wealth superfluous. He was a fine sportsman, immensely popular

and a man of absolute purity. For though there was passion in the blue eyes and in the generously moulded mouth, there was also restraint—even a sort of asceticism. He loved life—flung himself on it with a joyous singleness of purpose that the lightest of us envied. But he knew his values. He had also his own simple but absolute standards, and against these he never offended.

So that when he married, the whole man was thrown into the scales.

Fortunately Esther Meredith seemed to have been chosen for him by the gods who had sponsored him from his birth. They were happy—not in the make-shift, rough and tumble way that is the lot of most so-called happy people. Their way was their own. They lived in each other and for each other, and yet their love only opened their lives wider to the lives of others. A rare thing indeed. I know that the most cynical with regard to human relationships found release from their cynicism in the presence of those two. And indeed all sorts of people came eagerly to the lovely Dorset Manor House, where they lived whenever Dudley's professional career permitted, partly because of their lavish hospitality, but most of all for the comfort and reassurance which they so unconsciously radiated. Certainly they never knew how much their happiness made up the secret lives and faiths of others. I think they looked upon it as their carefully hidden treasure. For they were restrained, dignified people and chary of all outward demonstration. But indeed there was no need. There are things of the spirit which the spirit recognizes.

Outwardly Esther was her husband's antithesis. She was frail and slight—with a timid, almost reluctant hold on life—the sort of woman who seems already to have slipped anchor and to be drifting out on to unknown seas. She had a way of looking and listening as though she saw and heard a little more than other people. In another age she might have been a saint and mystic. Perhaps she was. At any rate she believed in Dudley with all the fervour of a religious temperament. They married when she was eighteen and Dudley twenty-four and in the full tide of his splendid youth, and quite naturally he became the rock on which all her fragile beliefs and dreams were founded. As she once said to me, half smiling: "If Dudley lied I should know there was no truth anywhere."

Pretty dangerous. And yet from first to last—a matter of twenty-five years—there was no shadow between them. Not even her childlessness and failing health—the two barbed shafts which the gods had held for them—could break through their defences. They needed no one to complete them and death itself could not destroy the perfection of their unity.

I do not mean by all this that they were more than human. Both sides must have had to make their adjustments. There must have been many things which Dudley's more vigorous temperament required and which he sacrificed. Of the two, seeing his love of life and action, he must have been the one to make the greater surrender. But I mean that the sacrifices were made gladly, and that she gave him something in return which no other woman could have given him, and that he knew it and worshipped her for it.

I have tried to gather the threads of Calhoun's story from every hand. The shortest and frailest of them add something to a pattern, which he himself believed to be unrecognizable even to his own vision. He may be right. At any rate when it was all over he made no mystery of himself. He had explained utterly to the one human being who mattered. The rest of us could take the facts as we chose.

But also there is the testimony of the two men who travelled with him on that final afternoon, of the station-master who talked with him a few moments as they walked down the platform together, of the chauffeur who sat beside him, watching with professional satisfaction his cool mastery of the great machine in the narrow winding lanes, and lastly of the woman who appears briefly and catastrophically—rather as a symbol of some elemental and untamed force in life than as a human being. There is only one thread that seems broken beyond repair. But there again, as he believed, it may be that we cannot see——

The two men were scarcely friends of his. They were fellow-travellers who had scraped acquaintance on sundry week-end journeys from London. Of course they knew him. And on that particular day their interest strained the bonds of their good manners. It was only a week since he had fought through one of the most spectacular murder trials recorded in the English courts, and had won a victory for the woman he defended—almost as it seemed from the very hands of the gallowsman. It was hard to sit there, remembering the glittering brilliancy of his legal tactics and that final overwhelming peroration, and be silent. Certainly,

at another time they might have congratulated him and even questioned him, for there was nothing in Calhoun that divided him from men. But on that day there was something about him that made even their subdued greeting seem an intrusion.

They say he sat in his corner of the carriage with his newspaper across his knees, and scarcely moved all through the three hours. At first they were shy of looking at him, but after a time they realized that he did not know they were there. His eyes were wide open and intent, their gaze apparently fixed on something in the far distance.

The two observers happened to be men of a certain amount of imagination and they recognized some subtle but profound change in him. It was not that he looked exhausted or older, though the grey wings on his temples had indeed spread themselves a little farther. It was rather as though he had been through some tremendous adventure which had stripped him to the soul, and that he had come out at last on a high place from which he could overlook the whole spread of life —that he had penetrated to a fourth dimension, and that his first terror had resolved itself into a sort of lofty understanding and compassion. One of the observers spoke of a friend of his who had been slowly dying, and who long before his death seemed to be already dead—to have thrown off the concerns of his earthly life like a worn-out garment. He said Calhoun reminded him of that man. In some inexplicable way he had "gone on"—out-stripped them so that they knew instinctively that he could scarcely hear or see them.

The station-master was less sensitive and therefore less receptive. To the two travellers the subsequent event seemed foreshadowed. To the station-master it was like a bolt from the blue. And yet he remembered every detail. Of course he was tremendously proud of Calhoun. The little wayside station that was like a toy —with its painted window-boxes and banks of flowers —basked in reflected glory. For twelve years it had been the starting-point for Calhoun's legal exploits and to it he had returned with all his laurels on him. And he had always been friendly and confidential, and almost boyishly glad to be home again.

Well, yes, perhaps he had seemed a little tired—the station-master admitted that much. He had stood for a moment, hatless in the sunshine, seeming to drink in thirstily the fresh country air, and now and then running his hand over his black hair as though freeing himself from some lingering anxiety. And he hadn't said much. For that matter the little station-master didn't give him a chance. He walked beside him to the car, chattering vigorously.

" Well, sir, you certainly did wonders. I didn't miss a word and I tell you honestly that until that last day when you fairly wiped the floor with them all, I had my doubts. And I'll tell you something more, sir. If it hadn't been you I believe I'd have my doubts still. We all would. I don't trust that woman. Don't like the looks of her or the way she treated her husband, even if she didn't poison him. But we know you. We know you wouldn't take up a bad case——" The little man wagged his head shrewdly. " I've a fancy the jury knew it too, sir."

"Well, if they did I don't mind," Calhoun said. "It's true enough."

"Yes, you've got a reputation behind you, sir. And lucky she was to get you to believe in her. She must be almighty grateful."

"Yes—she was—very grateful."

Then at the car Calhoun did something that he only did when he was going on a long journey. He shook hands. But the station-master understood. It was just a gesture of mutual congratulation.

He blinked friendlily through the window of the sedan. "It'll be a great home-coming, sir——"

Calhoun always drove himself. He enjoyed the feel of the strong, smooth engine under his hand. He knew every turn and stone of the roads and loved them. And usually he talked to the man beside him—discussed their mutual affairs with something of that feudal sense of belonging to one another which still lingers in some English households. Afterwards the chauffeur, in the witness-box, swore that his master had seemed "as usual," but refused sullenly to remember whether they had talked or not. He was evidently determined not to betray what he knew dimly to have been Calhoun's agony. But to me, Calhoun's friend, he was less reticent.

"No—he wasn't like himself. Not his ordinary self. You can imagine I was just bursting to ask him things—but somehow I couldn't. It wasn't that he was unfriendly. I believe he'd have told me right enough—but I just couldn't ask him. I can't seem to explain it. I was downright miserable. Even when he talked I couldn't answer. I sat there like a damned idiot,

saying yes and no, and feeling ready to cry like a baby. He only mentioned the trial once. He said: 'Punishment is the expression of our ignorance, Harry. If we knew the truth we couldn't punish anyone—not even ourselves. That's why we can be sure that there can be no hell——'

"Something like that it was. And then he began talking about the countryside—pointing out things that wanted doing to the hedges, and such like—as though he wanted to talk about them."

No doubt of that. It was for the last time. Even in the little things of life there is something poignant in the thought that we shall never do them again. It is like a warning of that "last time" of all before which our imagination quails. But when it comes most of us are past realization. And Dudley Calhoun was tremendously alive—tremendously aware. I can imagine that during the brief half-hour winding among the shadowy green lanes he tried to gather everything he loved close to him in a sort of last embrace. Even then it must have been difficult for him to have believed in the finality of it all. He was so much on the crest of life. Everything was there to assure him of his happiness and success. There must have been a conflict between the realities—the things as they seemed and as he knew them to be—such as comes to us in our dreams.

At the entrance to the drive he left the car, as was his custom, preferring to take a short-cut through the birchwood to the lawn, where he knew Esther would be awaiting him. The man, Harry, said that he lingered for a moment or two, with his hand on the door, as

though he were trying to say something, but in the end had just nodded and smiled, that quick, rather shy smile of his which made him so extraordinarily young. I believe he wanted to explain to Harry, who had been his batman during the war, and whose father had served his father. There was a brotherliness between them. No doubt he knew that he could trust to it.

The rest is his own story. Some of it—the outline—is public property. Some of it he gave to me on the several days that I saw him. And if I fill in the picture with my own colours, I believe I am justified of the truth. I knew them both so well—and afterwards I got to know Pauline Darnley too—well enough to imagine how she must have looked and spoken. Indeed my intimacy with the whole setting of their tragedy—if such it was—makes me almost unbearably clear-visioned.

I can see the house as he saw it, standing on the verge of the shadowy woodland, a typical "L"-shaped Elizabethan manor—and I can almost feel what he felt. For there can be a communion between houses and men as profound and mystic as that between men and the soil that is made of their people's dust. The fact that we have sentimentalized about these things does not make them less true. They were true for Dudley Calhoun. His people had laid the foundation stones of the grave and friendly house, and it had borne and buried most of them. It was saturated in their spirit. It stood closer to Calhoun's inner life than any friend—perhaps closer than Esther herself. It had shared in the vague bright dreams of his youth. And now sombrely aware of him, it seemed to grope

towards him with its shadow, offering shelter. Its knowledge of him, tender, protective and inhuman, gave him comfort. It passed no judgment. And after he had gone it would still be there with its understanding locked in its dark heart. So long as it stood, no matter what alien should possess it, there would be still something of Dudley Calhoun left in a world which he had loved so passionately and which had condemned him.

And I can see the green lawn shining in the afternoon sunshine, and the wind-blown shadows fluttering under the elms where the tea-table was already set, and the comfortable lounge chairs and Esther in her white dress—all the English peace of it.

She had become increasingly delicate. Every movement cost her an effort, yet as she saw him she rose and almost ran to meet him. She was so small and frail that she seemed to blow over the grass like a leaf before the light wind. Her hair was still fair—almost as fair as it had been in her girlhood, and indeed through some miracle she scarcely seemed to have aged. You see, she had never been really unhappy. If a human being can believe in anything or anyone absolutely he is practically impregnable. And Esther believed in Dudley and in their love for one another. The perfection of their relationship was her proof of immortality. So that even when Dudley went to the war it was not more than a physical hurt. The real Esther and the real Dudley were together for ever.

Usually their greetings were restrained — half whimsical, half awe-struck. I don't know how to

describe it. I have seen the laughter in their eyes as they looked at one another, and something deeper that would make the average human being feel enviously grateful—as though after all, loneliness was not an inevitable human heritage.

But to-day, regardless of the watching windows, he held her close to him, trying to shelter her in himself, and she clung to him, shivering a little and repeating in a kind of agony of relief:

"My dear, my dearest—it has been so long——"

He kissed her hair. He kissed her hands and gathered them together in both his and pressed them against his breast. To him her fear was a terrible affirmation of their unity. He saw that—knowing nothing—she yet knew everything. For these two the ordinary barriers behind which we hide our dark thoughts, our piteous treacheries, our incredible sins, were frailer than a mist. Momentarily she was confused. But in a little while she would break through. And he told me that a great calm came to him then. For he knew there was a way by which she could attain understanding.

He comforted her, steady and reassuring.

"I couldn't come before. There were many things I had to settle. When I came I wanted it to be for good."

"I know. Of course. I was foolish."

She freed herself, but as she walked beside him to the tea-table he could feel her hand stroking his coat sleeve in an eager, seeking kind of way, as though even now she wasn't quite sure. She caught herself at it and dropped her hand, laughing unsteadily.

"I'm not usually so foolish, am I? But this time I couldn't bear it. It was different——"

"I know," he said.

"One night is was so bad—it was the night of the verdict—that I nearly came. I even got so far as the station—without so much as a toothbrush—just sheer panic, dear. And then of course I turned back. I realized what a nuisance I would be——"

It was the first and only time that he came near breaking down. He couldn't have helped himself. As sometimes our heart stands still at the realization of the frail chance that saved us from disaster, so he had a moment's sickening vision of what so easily might have been. He said it shook his whole faith, making it seem as though we were the playthings of every wind that blows.

"Why didn't you come!" he cried out. "Esther, why didn't you come!"

It wasn't a question. It was an exclamation of such profound grief and protest that she stopped to look up at him.

"Did you want me so much—as much as I wanted you—even then?"

"I needed you——"

It was all he could manage. But his voice was quiet and reassured her.

"I might have thought you would. It was stupid not to believe my own heart. I ought to have known that it was your need that was urging me. But I was shaken. I have never been shaken like that before."

He made her lie back on the long wicker lounge and

covered her over with her white Spanish shawl, and laid his cheek against hers.

"It's all over now."

"Yes. It's all gone—all the stupid fear. Oh, Dudley, if it could only be like this for ever——"

"It's going to be."

She shook her head, smiling up wistfully.

"No—you'll have to go again. And one day I shall have to go."

"I shall be with you," he asserted firmly.

"One day—yes——"

"Always—from now on——"

"Dear, that isn't possible."

He answered: "I've finished with everything that separates us."

"Your work——"

"I've done with it. I'm not going back. I've finished with that life."

He sat down close to her, but bent forward with his elbows on his knees, so that he did not have to see her. For he was still trembling. The urge to throw himself upon her breast, crushing her world about her in his demand for the impossible, still had him by the throat. He could feel her pressing towards him. Her hand fluttered out, resting on his arm.

"Dudley—you're not giving it all up?"

"Yes."

"For my sake? But I don't want it—I don't ask it. You know I have never been like this before. I never will be again. I promise you. I never minded your going away. I don't know what happened. It was like being lost in a fog. I couldn't find you any

more. I suppose when one is ill one loses one's vision. I am ashamed."

The realization of how closely her thought paralleled his, of their terrible nearness to one another, drove him dangerously from his course.

"You need not be," he said impulsively. "You were right to be afraid. It was an ugly time."

"But for you it was such a triumph. You must have been proud and glad."

"Proud—yes. Too proud. And glad, of course, for I was sure of her innocence. But this—this bending men's wills and minds to your own—this juggling with their senses to subdue their opposition—it is ugly, Esther. The evidence was all against her. But I made them give that verdict. A thing like that makes a man drunk—beside himself."

She laughed indulgently, smoothing his cheek.

"Was that why I was so frightened?"

"Yes—I think so. You—you wouldn't have recognized the thing it made of me. And yet, if you could have seen beyond the simulacrum of myself you wouldn't have been afraid. It would have been no more to you than a distorting shadow. But that's how it is. We can only see the shadows of each other—even you and I—and when the light falls queerly——" He broke off and then quickly took up her first question. "No—it's not for your sake only. It's for us both. I'm through with all that. It seems already to belong to another life—half-forgotten—almost incomprehensible. There is only one thing that can separate us now."

A little silence drifted between them. She spoke at

last in a small voice out of which the breath seemed to have died.

"It may come very soon."

He lifted his eyes to hers. And then, he said, the thing happened. It was like a climax—as though unexpectedly, in a moment, they had reached the highest point of their pilgrimage and could see over all the way that they had travelled. And then, turning, they sank into each other—were drowned in that look of profound and utter union.

After that he never wavered. He was carried by an enduring ecstasy of faith.

"It may be, Esther. But you are not to be afraid. In a few days or a few weeks at most I shall follow you."

She lay still, with closed eyes, and he was free to trace the faint lines that life had etched about the small, girlish features. None of them were of pain—none of them were of his making. An eternal youthfulness shone through the worn-out sheathe of her body.

"I know what people would think I ought to say to you," she murmured. "I ought to say to you that you should stay here and try to find happiness. But when I think of your saying things like that to me I see how meaningless they are and how they would hurt."

"They would be mockery," he answered. "Our life has been wonderful. And when it is over we will go on together to another. I couldn't mar what we have had with some cheap makeshift."

"But we don't know," she reflected. "Perhaps it is as they say—that it is wrong and that one must wait

one's time. One doesn't know—not for certain. If anything you did should separate us afterwards——"

"Afterwards nothing can separate us," he exclaimed with subdued passion. "Afterwards must be either nothing or everything. I am a sinful man, Esther. But beyond and above my sinfulness is my unalterable self. It is that self that you shall meet——" He broke off. He heard himself stammering the quotation like a man who has at last found words for himself: "Now we see each other through a glass darkly, but then face to face——"

She laid her hand in his.

"You have loved me perfectly."

"I have loved you with all my heart and all my soul and all my mind," he answered. "And I shall be forgiven. I know that. Whatever punishment there is men will inflict on me, and I shall accept that patiently. But I shall follow all the same. You must be quite, quite sure."

She lay very still.

"You are quite, quite sure, Dudley?"

"Yes," he said.

"I am too. I always have been. It has made life very wonderful and very simple. My father and mother were like that. They weren't religious people. They just believed. They loved each other so much that they couldn't see how it could end. And then when I was hardly more than a little girl you came and I began to believe all by myself."

"You made me into a god, sweetheart."

"No—it wasn't that. But you made it easy to believe that a greater lover than you had given you

the power to love. I think perhaps if you had been different I couldn't have come through. I am not very strong. I am just one of those silly people who have to believe. It would have broken my heart——"

"It would have been the same for me," he said. "If you had failed me I couldn't have seen further than your failure. Our vision is so limited I think I should never have believed in anyone again."

Her hand tightened on his.

"Dudley—that was the awful thing. It wasn't your not being there—it was the fear of death. Real death. It was as though the Devil had come to me telling me that after all we are no more than some people say we are—animals with a little more intelligence—and that when I died I'd be dead, and that this light I'd lived by was just a will o' the wisp."

"Did he make you believe that? " he asked sadly.

"Only for a moment But I can't tell you the horror of it. I realized what my faith meant to me. I'd not been afraid to die—you know that. We've talked about it quite calmly and happily, haven't we? This was different. This was the end."

"It shall never come to you again. From now onwards you are going to know."

A faint, most lovely colour came into her cheeks. It was like a light burning up in her. She said quietly, with a tender solemnity:

"We are very, very happy."

The maid came fluttering across the lawn like a black and white moth. She set the tea things, expert and discreet.

"There was a lady asking for you on the 'phone,

ma'am. I told her you were at home and she said she was motoring over. I couldn't catch her name—something like 'Davley' it sounded."

"Very well. When she comes let me know."

The maid threw a quick glance at her master. Perhaps it was her awe of him—hadn't he filled her thoughts and been the subject of her conversation for weeks past?—that made her imaginative. She said there was something frightening about him—something that made her catch her breath and be glad to be gone. But she could never explain what it was, save that he didn't move—that he seemed like someone turned to stone.

And indeed for him, prepared and resolute as he was, it had been a death blow, paralysing the nerve centres. Perhaps he had—in spite of himself—clung to a remnant of that hope which is part of the instinct of self-preservation. Now it was gone. Irrevocable, the hour stood at his elbow.

He heard his wife's voice, small and tired, come to him from a long way off.

"I suppose we shall have people from all over the country now. You must tackle them yourself, my famous husband. It's not me they come to see. Davley. I don't seem to know anyone—and yet it's familiar, too."

"Darnley," he corrected, "Pauline Darnley."

He felt her startled movement.

"That woman——"

"Dear—she was innocent."

"Oh—I am sorry. I didn't mean to sound so hateful. Only—only—it was all so ugly, wasn't it?

And to-day is such a lovely day." She stretched out her hand to him again, smiling, contrite, with the shy tenderness of a girl in love. "After all, I've only just got you to myself again. I resent people. I'm jealous—I suppose I'm jealous of your saving her——" She must have seen something in his face for her tone changed. "Dearest, I'm teasing, you know. You make me ashamed. Of course I welcome her—all the more. Only to-day——"

"I know—I know——" he whispered. "It's our day. She's not going to take it from us."

"Why does she come, Dudley?"

"To thank me—after her fashion. She said she would. She's a headstrong, passionate woman who can't rest till she's done what she wants to do. Afterwards she cries over the broken pieces."

"She won't break anything to-day. Shall we wait tea for her?"

"No—don't wait."

He stood up. The little things he did for her were terrible in their commonplaceness. Just so much milk in her tea—just so much sugar. Yet though he felt them in all their poignancy, death had done its worst and gone. There remained the enduring certainty.

But he grieved that the shadow of Pauline Darnley should have fallen across her path. It was true that at best hers was a sorry, sordid story—a side of life that Esther had never known.

As though she guessed his thought, she said: "I have been too sheltered, Dudley. You have sheltered me so that from birth to death life will only have been part of a dream to me—a phase of immortality. I

shall never know what it is to have to fight one's way through the dark places. And I wonder sometimes if I have not paid too high for my secure way—lost a little of my soul—like Undine."

"The dark places are for us others," he said. "You do not need them any more." He smiled a little. "Perhaps you only came to fetch me, Esther."

But she was deep in her own thought.

"That woman—life must have been a very different thing for her."

"Yes. Don't worry about her. Not now. She shan't trouble you."

He gave her her cup and for a moment they held it between them, her white hand touching his brown one.

"I have been so safe with you. I shall always be safe. Dear hand——" She bent her head and kissed it. "Dear lover——"

He stood there, watching her. He said: "I wish I might drink that cup with you——"

A dark, puzzling saying it must have sounded in her ears. But it may be that poised on the verge of all knowledge there was no puzzle or darkness. His cry may have been part of the vast design already growing clear to her.

He said that—then a strange thing happened. All the afternoon the breeze and the trees and the singing of the birds had made a sort of quiet symphony about them. Now it seemed that everything fell silent. All nature stood breathless, waiting with bowed head, as before some great and solemn happening.

She looked up at him, smiling.

"How wonderful, sweetheart. You look so young standing there—just like a boy. Yes, you look like you did that day you asked me to be your wife. Have you anything to tell me now?"

"Yes," he said.

"Have you? Will it be sweet? Presently, dearest, presently. I am so tired—so sleepy, I can't keep my eyes open. Sit by while I sleep a little—just a little while. Hold my hand."

"I will hold it all the time."

"When she comes——"

"You won't mind. You will understand."

He knelt beside her. Once her eyes opened and rested on him in faint wonder and infinite tenderness, then closed again. And once she moved, like a dreamer composing himself peacefully for deeper sleep. Then the quiet again—more absolute now like the depths of a great sea in which they floated.

He did not know how long it lasted. A soundless wind passed over him, lifting his hair with the touch of an invisible hand. And as at a signal the tide of sound rolled back. In every quarter of the world—so vast the silence had seemed to him—the birds took up their quiet singing. The wind danced with the trees. He could hear the grass murmuring and the insects in the grass.

He knew then that it was finished.

Still kneeling with her hand in his he looked up. Pauline Darnley was standing there, her back to the evening sun. He was too dazzled at first to see her face. And indeed, until a great pity for her overcame him, she seemed scarcely an individual to him,

but rather the externalized Force which had destroyed him—the splendid, questing, conquering spirit of man —violent, proud and headstrong—the dynamic creative energy which in him, suddenly and terribly, had burst its banks. Neither more nor less than that.

So that he could look upon it sadly—without repulsion or resentment—as *she* was doing.

First it had been the fight—and a fight different from anything he had known. There had been the war, of course, but he was too sensitive, too civilized to be intoxicated by so crude a struggle. This had been a thing of the mind and spirit. And nothing in life had warned him that behind the highest elements in his nature the pent-up Force might be gathering itself secretly and disastrously. For he had felt chivalrously towards Pauline Darnley. He had believed in her. And he had meant to save her from the hideous mesh in which chance had entangled her. But as the weeks passed there came into his blood a lust to triumph over the forces opposed to him—a naked resolution that in other ages may have lifted his predecessors from the slime—at least an overpowering Will to Survive. The more hopeless the struggle became the higher that will reared its head—the more proudly and defiantly it held its ground. In these days Pauline Darnley had become a citadel that he was defending as his own life. He knew that if he lost her, in some terrible and vital way he would lose himself.

He remembered that last day. Outwardly he had been the composed and gallant gentleman—a man of the world—bending a brilliant intellect with all its

forensic gift and legal knowledge to the honourable business of his life. Inwardly he had been the savage—noble still perhaps—but no longer curbed by the traditions and inhibitions of his essential self. He lived again these hours of final effort in which mind and soul and body strained to the culminating task. He heard the uncontrollable burst of applause. He saw the twelve men whom he had beaten to their knees. He saw himself turn with an unstudied gesture of triumph to the woman who stood beside him—so white and yet so heroically alive—not a woman then but a flag.

She had been nothing to him—nothing but that from first to last. And yet when he had reached her house and the doors had closed behind them, and she had looked at him with that expression of utter, exultant surrender, he had gone straight to her and crushed her into his arms. Before that surge of creative force he had gone down. He too had become no more than an instrument, a weapon wielded in the blind hands of life.

But she had loved him—after her fashion.

And that almost instant revolt against himself, that horror that he could not hide, had been a blow in her face—the unforgivable outrage. And she was a woman who always struck back hard, with all the brute force of her simplicity. He knew that there was nothing to hope of her but the disastrous act.

Now she was there. He was beginning to see her face. It was white and strained.

Already she was dimly, confusedly aware—she said with a defiant effort at irony: "You see, I've come.

I said I would, didn't I? I told the maid I was an old friend "—then with a vague, uneasy movement: "Is—is she asleep?"

He nodded.

"You don't think I'm bluffing, do you? I do what I say I am going to do. You can't get away with things like that, my friend. I've come to tell her——"

"She knows," he said.

"You told her——?"

He did not answer. It was then that suddenly he pitied her, and with her the whole world. It seemed that she couldn't stand. She sat down, trembling, with wild, furtive eyes on the still white figure. She was like that—like a bolting horse that cannot see where it is going until it is too late.

"What have you done?" she whispered. "What have you done?"

He got up. Gently he freed himself from the hand that held him and laid it across the sleeper's breast.

"Neither of us has anything to tell her," he said. "She understands more than either you or I, Pauline——"

"She—she is dead?"

"I killed her—just now—before you came."

A cry came from her—a moan of an animal caught in a steel trap.

"Am I to be guilty of that too?"

He looked at her curiously. He knew then that she had lied. Everything was in her disastrously lovely face—the thing that she had hidden from him—and all that had gone before in hatred and fear and despair. But he was without judgment.

"Who is guilty?" he asked of himself.

"You are cruel—you are terrible," she stammered at him. "You might have known I only wanted to pay you out—I meant to frighten you—I wouldn't have done it. There are things even I stick at——"

"Who knows?" he asked back. "It doesn't matter, Pauline. It isn't your doing."

But she clenched her hands and cried at him in the same strangled, frantic voice:

"You are horrible. Men do these things and women forgive them. She would have forgiven you——"

"She would have forgiven me. But it would have broken more than her heart. I could have told her a thousand times that I had never wavered in my real fidelity—she could not have understood. Even you don't. I do—a little. She is the only one of us who knows how it all happened."

"But she is dead—dead——"

"You don't know how we loved each other," he went on. "Otherwise you would understand better. Even if you kept silent, Pauline, I couldn't have done. I want you to be sure of this because I don't want you to be hurt any more. You have been hurt enough. There are things people can't hide when they have been as near to each other as we were—as happy. I might perhaps have been silent too—carried the burden of silence as my punishment—but she would have known. If she had known everything—but that wasn't possible—not then."

She stood up. She was trembling as with a fever.

"I think you are mad too," she moaned, "horribly, horribly mad."

"You see, we just haven't the words," he said, "and we don't even understand ourselves. We can't explain. And so we condemn ourselves and each other. We break our hearts over the whole puzzle. Death is a little thing. Beyond it, I think, is God and something better than pity for us all."

She whispered: "You believe she knows—that she is alive—here—with us."

He answered dreamily: "I shall know too in a little while."

He did not see how long she stood there looking at them both. But presently he felt that she had gone, just as she had come, like a fine, stalwart ship riding the seas without helm or helmsman, foredoomed to disaster, a menace to all wayfarers and yet for all that —pitiable.

He bent and gathered his wife in his arms. He carried her over the lawn grown dark under the lengthening velvet shadows. He carried her into the house, and it seemed to him that a host of memories gathered about them both to make her cortège.

The trial lasted only three days. There was no defence. He went into the witness-box and told his own story, withholding Pauline Darnley's name. I shall not forget the atmosphere of that court nor the voice of the judge as he passed the sentence. Not the most stupid of us but knew that the fatal words came to the man to whom they were addressed as a benediction—as the promise of release. And the judge was old and had the intuition of those who are them-

selves near to the final answer, and there was, I think, a paternal tenderness in the frail voice.

You see, they believed him. They accepted his faith. And it is significant that there was no movement for a reprieve—not even among those who loved him best. They would not have done him so much hurt.

They say that he was like a bridegroom. The hideous procession, which the most hardened dreads and which leaves him sick in memory, was no more than the going of a man's friends with him to the verge of a solemn, high adventure. To the Chaplain the words: "I am the Resurrection and the Life," became for the first time a blazing actuality.

I can see all the paraphernalia of that sinister, colourless death. Yet they say that when they drew the black hood over his head it was no more than the obscuring of a light.

VIII

ALL DRESSED UP

VIII

ALL DRESSED UP

I

He was of the old school. He believed in cold steel. "All this cricket-ball stuff," he would say, referring to the Mills Bomb with professional contempt—"why, a man don't see wot 'its 'im. And wot a man don't see 'e ain't afraid of." And he would go on to talk about "morale," and to point out how in the end it was steel that made 'em run.

The Sergeant-Major had been through several campaigns, and he knew. Now he had a little tobacconist's shop off the Walworth Road. He was a good man, doing a tidy business, and much respected. On Sundays he wore an old-fashioned frock-coat and carried the plate at the Wesleyan Chapel, of which he and Emmeline, his wife, were members. On week-days, over the counter, he would give his customers a friendly wink and a twenty-to-one tip.

That, of course, was before the war.

When the War Office, in need of experts, dug him out of retirement, the Sergeant-Major encased his wiry old legs in puttees, handed over the business to

Emmeline, and went back to his old job of making soldiers. Having been in the Coldstreams, he had high ideals and a way with him. No one knew how many shuffling, gawkish civilians went out of his hands straight-shouldered, word-of-command guardsmen, almost up to pre-war standards. Battalions came and went on the dreary Westbury Plain, but the Sergeant-Major stayed. He would stand at the door of the N.C.O.'s mess, and watch them come blundering and panting up the hill with their kit-bags slung over their shoulders—all anyhow; and he would watch them go—" one-two, one-two "—smart as you please—down hill and into the belt of fog. He knew them by name, and kept the daily printed lists on file with a cross against those he had trained himself. He could tell you exactly where they failed or excelled.

" Bill Saunders now—he was a fine one when the drink was in him. Cold sober, he was like a rabbit. If they sent Bill over the top without an extra tot of rum, it was a crime."

He spoke as of an artist deprived of legitimate material.

The Sergeant-Major had a snappy, barking voice. He looked like an elderly, rheumy-eyed terrier with bushy eyebrows and a scrubby, bristling moustache. He walked stiffly, his shoulders thrown back, trying to disguise rheumatic twinges.

In the evening, his duties over, he wrote home to Emmeline about the shop. He sat with his head bent close to the paper and his tongue between his teeth. Emmeline was doing her bit all right, but she didn't know the ins and outs of trade, and had a soft heart

for good-looking customers who wanted credit. The Sergeant-Major, amidst advice and admonition, comforted her.

" When this here blasted war is over," he wrote. . . .

II

They were " C3 " men. That is to say, the scum and scourings of a nation at the end of three years of expensive warfare. Speaking physically. Tinker, tailor, beggarman, thief; but not a born soldier among them. And not one without a heart murmur, a dubious lung or a varicose vein. The Sergeant-Major, looking them over on that bleak March morning, pursed his lips.

They looked back at him apologetically. To be alive at all at that stage of the game was either a miracle or a disgrace. And they were obviously a disgrace. Shame had been stamped on their bodies from the moment they had stood shivering and mother-naked under the ironic eyes of the medical officers. Now the Sergeant-Major stamped shame on their souls. For his little gimlet eyes saw how afraid they were.

" Don't you be down-'earted," the Sergeant-Major said. " I'll make soldiers of you."

They weren't unwilling. They weren't even afraid in the ordinary sense. Being killed at that moment was nothing compared to the terrifying mystery and strangeness of the metamorphosis that was expected of them. Back there in the dim past of yesterday they had known who they were. Now they were just

numbers. They meant nothing to themselves. In the long, low hut which had been the home of thousands of profane and worried men, now comfortably dead, they looked at their legs in the unfamiliar clothing, and at their feet in the heavy army boots, with surreptitious astonishment. Towards each other they were as wary and tentative as strange dogs.

It was Sam Rogers, huddled by the red, glowering stove and groaning with back-ache, who brought them uneasily together. They compared the physical disabilities that had kept them out of things for three years.

A miserable three years. A nightmare. People had looked at you. "Why aren't you at the Front, young man?" You could see the question in their eyes. Or you thought you saw it. Despised, anyway. Unfit. A beastly thing to be reminded of, day in, day out. That was over, thank God! They were out of *that*.

But the disabilities remained, even though the authorities graciously overlooked them. Cobham had a weak chest, but the medical officer had assured him it would last him as long as he'd need it. Haselton had a gammy knee. And so on. The only sound one among them was Jim Cuffy, who had been exempted for land work. It seemed that Cuffy had a peculiar talent for pigs. Now a woman had got his job. Cuffy talked incessantly about his pigs, his blue, rather foolish eyes wide with anxiety.

"Stands to reason no woman could know the ways of pigs," he said. "Pigs is peculiar animals. They don't stand no foolishness."

" It feels queer—my being a soldier," said Cobham.

" You ain't."

" You wait till that there Sergeant-Major's done with you."

" Looks as though we'd caught a gory tartar."

" If my missus could see me nah—in this 'ere rig-out——"

In spite of the huge iron stove they couldn't get the place warm. And yet it was stifling, too; the air tasted of boot-leather and rank tobacco and stale oaths. Cobham went to the door and opened it. For a moment the crowded men were silent, caught by a faint thudding, so ghostly that they were hardly aware of it, so profound that it seemed to weaken the earth under their feet.

" Wot's that? "

" Guns."

" Wot guns? "

" Over there."

" G'arn! "

" It's true. You can always hear them on still nights. There isn't anything between us and the sea."

From where Cobham stood he could look over the whole plain, its melancholy, static waves merging into the low grey sky. The army huts crouched together in its loneliness like black sheep.

" They say it'll be over in six weeks."

" They've been saying that for three years."

" Stands to reason——"

" There ain't no reason."

" Well, anyhow," said Cobham, speaking out of his

thoughts, " I don't care. The boss promised to keep my job for me."

Someone laughed.

" They all do——"

" Cheerio! Chances are you won't ever ask 'em for it."

But Cobham was thinking of a litter of kittens his sister had given him to drown. He didn't know why he thought of them. He remembered sitting on the river's edge, stroking their dank fur with a trembling forefinger, and feeling awful. Then afterwards he had run away like a murderer.

" When I sees blood I faints," Haselton explained. " It's wot they calls a hidiosincrasy. I told that there doctor and he just laughs. ' Then you won't want no chloroform when they chops your leg off,' 'e says."

" The rotter! "

Cobham drew himself up, catching his shallow breath. He thought of the way the Sergeant-Major had looked at him, and he made up his mind. You could do anything if you only made up your mind. The book on " Personality and Success " said so.

" I'll show him," Cobham thought. " I'll show him."

He saw himself being decorated on the field of battle. He had captured a salient single-handed. He wondered vaguely what a salient looked like.

" And for Gawd's sake shut that blinkin' door! " said Sam Rogers, shivering.

It wasn't so easy.

With regard to bayonet practice, for instance, Cobham went through two distinct stages. At first, if he struck in cold blood, picking out the throat or

armpit—a peculiarly useful spot on account of the arteries concealed there—something happened at the pit of his stomach. Once he had been actually and disgustingly sick. There was something about that idiotic bag dangling at the end of a cord—something about its good-natured, helpless rotundity and the white-chalked, astonished eyes and gaping mouth that made Cobham feel awful. And when he jabbed at it, driving home to the hilt in his nervousness, it gave way with a sort of "grump" of bewilderment and pain, as though it were exclaiming: "What did you do that for, old man? What's the great idea?"

That was the first phase. In those days they still talked about their jobs and their people, and were hag-ridden with worries about the life they had left behind them. At night their limbs ached so that they couldn't sleep, and they lay tossing and groaning, tormented by an inarticulate home-sickness. Before dawn a vixenish bugle-call tore them out of a brief unconsciousness. They huddled into the still unfamiliar tunics, fumbling with straps and buckles, sweating with dread of the drill that they would never learn, of that treacherous cotter-pin that you had to pull out at the right moment or the damned thing might explode in your hand, of the march over the endless plain in full equipment, to prove that by the skin of your teeth you could just lurch in at the end of the last mile.

They were still what they had been; tinker—tailor—beggarman—thief; anything and everything; isolated individuals, revolving in bewilderment and suffering.

Then gradually they began to suffer less. Their past slipped from them. Their different backgrounds

were sponged out and merged into the grey plains; the boss, the manager, the foreman became a composite figure—common to them all, and master of their common destiny—the Sergeant-Major. They cursed him without anger. They swore the same oaths that seemed to have been left behind as a heritage by their ghostly predecessors. They learned to wind their puttees with precision. The little quirks, the individual inexactitudes that had got them into endless trouble, were obliterated. Their faces, so diversified in feature, took on a curious uniformity. Though they were all shapes and sizes, they had learnt to move like one man.

They discovered the " pub " in the village three miles away. It was a desolate place, and the girl who served them a blowzy slut. But they talked incessantly of her. Of women. Talk that came to them from they didn't know where. At night the long, low hut reeked of it, and of boots and sweat.

In those days Cobham could hardly thrust at all. Boredom had settled on him like a fog. His limbs were sodden with it. His mind was yellow and thick with it.

The Sergeant-Major ground his teeth. He made noises in his throat like an enraged gorilla—" G-r-r-r! " and the platoon copied him with a half-hearted ferocity —" G-r-r-r! "—stabbing upwards, but not too heavily, lest you got your bayonet entangled with some rough interior organ requiring a discharge to be broken up. Sheer waste of ammunition. And—the nation couldn't afford waste.

The Sergeant-Major knew what had happened. The whole Company had gone stale. Not that it had ever

been much good. But now that the incentive of novelty and fear was played out, it had got worse. It had gone bad on him. It was the fault of the W.O., who had apparently forgotten that it had ever existed, leaving it to rot on the Sergeant-Major's hands.

" Isn't there any blamed hole they could fill up with these here rag-pickings? " the Sergeant-Major demanded of high heaven.

He knew better than to expect an answer. The job of keeping this third-class fighting machine at concert-pitch remained his. His officers were no good—" dug-outs," or young cubs who couldn't give an order without referring to their manual. Even the other N.C.O.'s were raw stuff. The Sergeant-Major felt himself to be the last representative of an order that was passing away.

IV

He stood on a strip of rising ground, leaning against the wind that seemed to haunt the plains like a damned spirit, and looked down at the pinched, blue-tinted faces of the platoon under instruction. An inspecting General had made the rounds the day before, and things had gone badly. The Sergeant-Major had come into his share—handed down from Colonel to Captain, and from Captain to the latest-acquired subaltern.

Afterwards the Sergeant-Major had written home to Emmeline.

" It's the truth. They ain't even good for cannon fodder. Nobody but an idjit would waste powder on

them. They haven't a penn'oth of natcheral spunk between them. . . ."

Now he stood there, his thin, wiry legs straddled a little, and ground his yellow teeth. The platoon faced each other in grotesque attitudes of attack, watching him out of the corner of their eyes with a sullen intentness. They were useless. The Sergeant-Major's rage died down to a sort of embittered pity. They might know how, they might repeat the same movements a dozen times, but the real heart of their job was hidden from them.

"You're fighting," the Sergeant-Major barked. "You aren't poking at sawdust dolls with a cussed hatpin. Wot you've got to do, if you can't fight natcheral, is to think of someone you've got a down on—someone wot's done you dirty and who's comin' at you to give you the K.O. Wot you going to do about it? You with a blinkin' bayonet in your mits? Let 'im come at you? Not you. You ain't going to stand it—not even though you isn't much better than a new-born mouse. No; you ups and gives 'im six inches of cold steel in the gizzard. That's wot you does, ain't it? "

The idea was new to them. They grinned at it. Of course there was always somebody you'd like to have a go at. "Me blasted old mother-in-law, f'r instance," Haverstone whispered hoarsely. "Watch me give her one——" And Higgins was remembering Rogers. The night before, Rogers, in a senseless fit of exasperation, had kicked over the checker-board, just when Albert Higgins had been on the point of victory.

But it hadn't occurred to Higgins to go for him, even with his fists. They had just cursed futilely at one another. Now Higgins visualized Rogers in the act of wanton and unsporting aggression. He recalled the stupid, suffused face to his own inarticulate fury, which hadn't known which way to turn for relief.

A gust of stinging, exasperating wind filled Higgins's eyes with dust. There was dust in his mouth. His teeth were gritty with it. Everything had gone wrong that morning. A bootlace had snapped. One of those damned puttees had come unwound. He'd been late for inspection. And Cobham, who'd been made lance-corporal because he'd got education and was a ruddy pusher, had had the cheek to shout at him.

Suddenly, viciously, he lunged.

" 'Ere—wot the 'ell! " Rogers gasped.

He struck back blindly, his eyes round with indignant astonishment. The rifles clashed, slithered ineffectually past one another. The whole platoon flashed into action, stabbing, lunging. But Rogers and Albert Higgins were almost motionless, locked together, body against body, in an inexorable embrace. They didn't seem able to free themselves. To Higgins there was something horrible about Rogers's face. It was too big. The eyes were like those of a wild steer. He hated the feel of the panting breast against his own. He felt sick. . . .

A familiar voice barked at them. They drew away reluctantly, avoiding each other's eyes. There was blood on Higgins's hand. He rubbed it off on the seat of his breeches. He didn't want Rogers to see that he'd been hurt.

"By all the rules and reg'lations, you're both dead men," the Sergeant-Major commented bitterly. "You ain't committing suicide, are you?"

He snatched the rifle out of Rogers's hands and showed him the parry and thrust, the platoon standing at ease, watching, and breathless with the unexpected explosion of violence in them.

The thing worked, anyway. Particularly where Cobham was concerned. Cobham was inarticulate, but he had imagination. He saw pictures inside his head—pictures of Cobham taking a salient single-handed, Cobham rising to the position of manager at the Branch Bank, Cobham married to the pretty cashier who wrote to him once a week and was knitting a muffler for him. All he had to do was to make a picture of someone who'd done him dirty. Then he wouldn't be so bored. He'd be keen. He'd become a first-class soldier. Even the Sergeant-Major would have to admit it. By the end of the war he'd be a Captain, and all the bank officials would say: "Bravo, Cobham, old man!" and be proud to know him.

It was a pity that Cobham was such a disarmingly friendly fellow. He'd never had an enemy. And for the life of him he couldn't remember anyone who'd done him anything that deserved six inches of cold steel anywhere. There had been a chap in the office who had borrowed a "fiver" the night he enlisted, and who had never paid it back. But as he had gone up somewhere on the Somme you couldn't exactly blame him—much less get mad about it.

Cobham tried to imagine somebody particularly

hideous and detestable. Just before bayonet practice he would get himself all worked up about some monster who spent his leisure moments cutting off the hands of small children. The only trouble was that Cobham couldn't see him clearly. The moment he tried to give the fiend eyes and a nose and a mouth he became just anybody. He might have been Cuffy or Albert Higgins.

It ended in the thing becoming faceless and formless. It became so indescribably hateful that when the Sergeant-Major gave the word, Cobham went to it with a fury that on the coldest day drenched his meagre body with sweat. A not particularly effectual fury. The Sergeant-Major expressed his opinion of the results with a not ill-natured sarcasm.

"Nah, then, my bantam, wot cher think yer doing, eh? Diggin' someone with an umbrella?"

Nevertheless he had to admit that Cobham put his heart in the job. For that matter there were days when the whole Company seemed to be electrified by a sort of blind rage.

It helped, particularly when you were deploying over the plain, taking shelter where you could from the non-existing machine-guns, flinging yourself flat on your stomach on the cold wet earth—just so that your rifle came easy to hand. Over the rise of the land was the enemy. He was coming at you. Any moment his unimaginable monstrousness would loom up against the low, rain-sodden clouds. You had to get him before he got you. You had to see him first or it was all over. That made your flesh prickle along the spine. It gave you an odd choking sensation in

the throat. Above all, it made you damn cautious—damn quick.

Almost before the whistle sounded Cobham would be on his feet, running with his head down and his teeth set. Someone who had done you out of something. . . .

It got to be the bugle blasting you out of sleep at five o'clock on bitter mornings—fatigues, long, meaningless marches in full kit over the bleak hills, straps galling your shoulders, your feet gummed in the mud or aching with the hard, cracked earth, your rifle a malevolent burden you didn't know how to carry for sheer misery, your breath coming in sobs.

It got to be the well-meaning ladies and gentlemen who came to sing mildly comic songs and painfully patriotic ballads to you at week-ends. It came to be the gramophone. It got to be the food. It got to be the monotony.

To keep going you invented a dull, smouldering anger that at a given moment would explode into action.

V

He'd been drinking, and his perpetual back-ache made him short-tempered. And when the blowzy barmaid at "The King's Head" asked him ironically: "Wot are you old boys gettin' ready for—the next war?" he threw his beer-mug at her and cut her head open. Immediately the squalid, melancholy barroom was convulsed by a crazy uproar—the barmaid in hysterics, screaming that she had been murdered, and

a free fight breaking out among groups of men from different companies who had never seen each other before.

Cobham, as lance-corporal, called in a couple of Military Police, who arrived red-hatted and portentous, to take the befuddled and indignant Rogers to the extemporary "clink" behind the canteen. Cobham trailed behind them. He himself was sullen with a resentment that focused itself on one thing after another. The barmaid's joke was an old one. The Battalion—with the Front screaming for reinforcements—had rotted on the plains for six months. Six months of it! And even your girl not writing you any more—not after that last post card asking if you'd joined the Conscientious Objectors. And going off to night clubs with a fellow who'd been in it since 1914 and had the D.C.M.

It was raining, too. In torrents. The road, mashed to a quagmire by horses, gun-carriages and a million marching men, seemed to slide away from under him like a nightmarish, moving platform. Just in front, Rogers, sagging between his captors, kept up a stream of miserable protest.

It weren't fair. Wot the 'ell did they think they were doing with a fellow? Was it his fault he hadn't been killing people for the last six months—ever since he'd learnt how? Might as well 'ave been at 'ome—minding the shop wot 'ad gone bust owin' to 'is blinkin' partner being weak in the 'ead and not too honest either. Not to notice——

The M.P.s maintained a stately silence.

The rain lashed Cobham's hot face. A friend at the

Bank had written him that Chisholm, that ferret-eyed nephew of the manager, had been given his desk. It'd take dynamite to pry him loose from it. Suppose they didn't keep their promise about giving him back his job? And what was the matter with Madge, anyway? Hadn't women any sense of justice?

His mind was like an ant-heap, squirming and wriggling with one worry after another. He didn't care a damn about the war. He wouldn't care a damn if they did take his stripe from him. As to that invisible enemy that never came to grips—he was sick of him. Sick to death. Sick of hand-grenades exploding uselessly, and sick of out-marching armies that didn't exist—sick of charging into empty trenches and prodding men with a sheathed bayonet. Sick of the whole damned farce. If it went on much longer, you wouldn't be able to believe in anything—not even in your own existence.

The sentries, immense, shrouded figures looming behind the slanting downpour, challenged them. It was like a pantomime. What did they expect? Spies? An enemy division, perhaps? Or the Kaiser? Not a hope! Cobham growled an answer, and they scrunched past into the lighted lane between the low crouching army huts. Wrapped as he was in the blanketing clouds of his depression, Cobham became aware of some vital change. There was movement. A sort of invisible mental movement that you felt. The door of the Recreation Hut stood open, and young Phelps—who had something mysterious the matter with his insides—shouted at Cobham in a queer, high-pitched voice.

"I say, Cobham—we're off—we're off!"

"Tell that to the Marines!"

"But it's true. To-morrow. They say there's going to be a break through. We're being rushed up to the Front Lines. Kit inspection in an hour."

A strange feeling came over Cobham. He had had it once before—in a dream. He had dreamed that he was floating in mid-air—lifted right out of life—above himself—so that he could look down at himself from a great distance. It was like that.

He said quietly to the M.P.s: "Let him go, can't you?"

And they in turn looked at their captive with a queer look, as though in a moment he had changed under their hands. Not any more a mere drink-sodden rowdy, but somebody set apart—different from themselves. They nodded briefly.

"They'd let 'im off, anyway. Seeing 'ow things are."

"Gawd!" Rogers muttered.

They went into the hut. Half the Company was there. But there was also an unaccustomed quiet—a peculiar peace. Men moved softly—spoke in undertones, gently, to one another. Most of them were writing, bent low over the paper, their thick, difficult fingers gripping the pen hard.

Cobham caught his breath. He didn't know that he had been stabbed through with the realization of a strange beauty. The ordered tumult and squalor of their lives had settled like a sediment, and in the yellow charity of the lamplight the bowed heads had a look of sanctified innocence and youth.

Cuffy and Fred Smith crouched together by the stove. They whispered to one another. They weren't like the rest. They were country people, sound in wind and limb and rather stupid. They knew nothing real about the war or their share of it. They wanted to get home —back to the formless good that they had left behind them. The others glanced at them with a vague hostility. They were outsiders to this new emotion. Cuffy was actually talking about his pigs, his voice sounding on the verge of tears.

Cobham found a vacant place at the long table. He felt for his fountain pen and his notebook. He was surprised to see how his hand trembled. He himself was quite steady. Not a bit afraid. Of course he was going to die. They all were. It was rot to say that men never believed they would be killed. Cobham knew he would be killed. The last draft had been wiped out as though a giant had put his foot on it. Squelch. It was all right, though. Everything was all right. He was happy. There were tears in his throat. Sheer beauty. So young. So splendid and beautiful to die when you were young. He was glad to think what a good lob he had with those damn grenades.

And last week the Sergeant-Major had said to him: "You're coming on, Bantam. You'll be a fighting-cock by the time I'm through with you."

It was going to be real. At last. No more make-believe. All the things that you had learned—that had become nauseatingly meaningless—well, you had to know them now or be kicked out. Out of life. No mistakes. No fiddling with that tricky little cotter-pin. And you were going to see yourself, too. For the first

time. Yourself stripped of all the things you thought you were—in action—your secret, your real self.

That was the greatest adventure.

Cobham began to write. He felt calm and exalted.

" Dear Madge,—This is just to tell you that we have marching orders. They are rushing us to the Front. If you would come to the station—just to give us a send-off——"

The Sergeant-Major marched with his Company; one-two, one-two—quick step—his shoulders thrown back, hiding how bent they felt. It was a queer irony that the Sergeant-Major, who had been with the Coldstreams, should go into the best war of all with a crowd of nondescripts. But there it was. Life was like that. The Sergeant-Major was an old soldier who took things as they came.

They marched down the hill into the belt of autumn fog.

He hadn't thought they would ever send him. He wasn't so young any more. But, of course, they were short of real fighters. They needed the old stuff to strengthen the new, untried metal.

It was all right.

The night before he had written home to Emmeline —stiffly, with his tongue clenched very hard between his teeth :

" The men are first-rate. I've made a good job of them. You wouldn't know them from the real thing. Now don't you fret. Get Aunt Sophie to take the shop for an hour, and give us a wave, old girl."

VI

The high, glass-domed station was a bowl of fog, in which lights swam like dimly iridescent fish over a dark tangle of moving undergrowth. Groups of soldiers were gathered round the iron gates leading to the platforms. They had been there every night for so many years that they had become a part of life. Other travellers passed them shyly. Their kit lay at their feet, their rifles were slung over their shoulders. The faces that looked out from between the upturned collars of their great-coats were impassive—the eyes in shadow.

There were only a few to say good-bye. Most of the draft were from the north, and their " good-byes " were over. But Cobham's girl was there, and old Emmeline. Old Emmeline was large and stout, with a bonnet tilted a little over one ear. She and the Sergeant-Major scarcely spoke to one another. They were both old soldiers, who took their orders without talking. But under the fat and wrinkles one might have traced the shadowy outlines of a lost, unhappy child.

Cobham's girl had dressed herself in her best. She stood close to him and told him about her war work and the dances she had been to. She fidgeted with her gloves. Every now and then their eyes met.

A whistle sounded. The Sergeant-Major rapped out an order. The iron gates rolled back. The men bent to gather up their kit.

Cobham's girl flung herself on his breast. She dug her thin white fingers into the folds of his tunic.

"I've been a beast—a beast! There's never been anyone else in the world——"

And now he was going to die. They both knew it. He held her close, comforting her gently. People looked away from them as from something intolerable. But Cobham felt on the very crest of life. He was living, as in those days of stodgy routine he could not have imagined it possible to live—briefly, but with an austere, white-hot intensity.

The gates shut behind them. Drawn faces were pressed against the bars. One-two, one-two. Old Emmeline walked out of the station with her head up. She had to hurry. Aunt Sophie was a bit foolish-like. You never knew what she might be up to.

Doors slammed. The train began to slide out of the station like a piece of drift-wood drawn out of its back-water by an inexorable tide towards the sea.

VII

Cobham stood with his elbows on the taffrail. Every light had been extinguished. Through the thick, moving obscurity he could only imagine the ship under his feet—or himself. Every now and then he ran his hand over the life-belt about his waist to remind himself that he was alive. It was easier to believe in the death slyly and patiently groping for them through the black, invisible water. Once he thought he saw it glide alongside, showing a thin, white line of foam.

Cuffy stood beside him. Cuffy, he felt sure, was blubbering. It made Cobham sick with impatience.

He wanted to get away from Cuffy as from something unclean. Through the throb of the engines—and they, too, sounded muffled, as though the ship herself were aware and creeping stealthily along a path infested by assassins—he could feel Cuffy crying.

But neither of them spoke. And Cobham thought of the white cliffs that he couldn't see and would never see again. And tears came into his own eyes. But they were hot, splendid tears that a man need not be ashamed of. It was a grand thing to die on the very crest of life—not miserably and uselessly like an old, diseased rat creeping into its hole.

He felt movement behind the black wall against his eyes. He seemed to hear the rush of invisible wings. A hand laid itself on his arm. He recognized Rogers's voice—become almost unrecognizable.

" It's the Dover Patrol. They're convoying us. Great lads——"

Cobham felt fire run up his spine. He had to set his teeth against a sob. The Dover Patrol. Name of an enduring heroism. And between those faceless, legendary men and himself ran a fiery bond of comradeship.

Morituri te salutamus.

That old gorgeous tag.

" Those gory blighters—we'll show 'em——"

A kind of rough joy sounded in the once querulous voice. Rogers had lost his back-ache. Cobham began to hum under his breath; some idiotic song he'd heard at the Coliseum that night he and Madge had gone out together for the last time. He had held her hand. He was in uniform. Before, she had always refused.

And he had known that she was ashamed of his civilian clothes.

It was all right now.

Rogers's shoulder was pressed gently against his. Good old Rogers! You wouldn't have to prod him over the top. Perhaps they'd go together——

How proud she'd been! Nobody had ever been proud of him before. In a way he was dying for her. He imagined her lying on her bed in the girls' hostel where she lived, her white fingers twisted in the folds of the bedclothes and crying—crying. He didn't suppose—for now he had put dreams and all other childish toys away from him—that she would ever know how the end came. Things like that only happened in slushy stories. And this was real. But she would know that he had done his best faithfully. He wouldn't make a mess of things.

Supposing he just got a " blighty." Some men did. And came home and were patched up and sent back again and again. Or—or were too messed up even for that. No. He turned his mind away. He was possessed of a calm fatalism—a certainty. It wouldn't happen like that. It would be as he wished it—clean —final—one superb gesture.

And that infernal Cuffy snuffling like a kid that had lost its mother!

VIII

There was no doubt that they were in a hurry—whoever " they " were. The tide was flowing faster, spreading its banks till it swept with you the gathered

remnants of a whole nation in arms. Worcestershires, Lancashires, Argyles, Naval Reserve, Artillery—pell-mell—down gang-planks, through base camps into foul-smelling, congested trucks that jolted hideously. Night and day. But always forward—eastwards, the very slowness of that vast movement suggesting depths of urgency—the unfelt speed of a universe whirling through space—invisible to itself.

The divisional train halted at the big stations, and Englishwomen—neat in uniform—and thank God they were English and could be articulate and friendly too! —handed up thick sandwiches and mugs of steaming coffee. You crowded up to them like stray, anxious dogs wanting to be petted. There was one, a bit like Madge, who smiled at Cobham.

" Good luck—good luck! "

She was a new hand—quite a kid. Or perhaps she was one of the sort that never got used to things. Her eyes filled with tears. For she knew, too, that he was going to die. And as the train pulled out, he stood at the open door of the truck, gallantly at the salute, and laughing down at her.

Morituri te salutamus.

On again. Through a drab, crawling twilight into night. Their bones began to ache. Their faces in the dim light of an oil lamp gaped with stupefaction. They were like the faces of thieves and murderers. Their bodies were like the bodies of the cattle that had preceded them—close packed and giving out an acrid stench of excitement and fear and deathly weariness.

About midnight they jolted to a standstill. Whistles

shrilled. The doors of the trucks were flung open. They scrambled down stiffly on to soggy, trampled earth. They huddled close to one another. There was a thin ground fog through which they discerned starlight and their own ghostliness. It isolated them in an immediate silence. It shrouded their voices, the faint clash of arms and the stir of their uneasy feet, so that they should hear more clearly what lay beyond—that one stupendous undertone.

Gun-fire.

They had heard it before. Not like this. They had been shivering. Now they stood very still, with their faces lifted and turned eastwards.

Officers with torchlights and papers in their hands ran backwards and forwards. Orders were given quietly. They moved on. Into emptiness. They knew nothing. Only the one thing. Their limbs that had been stiff with cold and fatigue became mechanical instruments of their tense wills. They forgot the incredible burden that they carried. They were strung to a high pitch of achievement that they might never know again. No more tinker, tailor, but fighters—trained fighters who, by God, were going to show that they had learnt their trade!

Cuffy and Fred Smith marched together, not speaking, with their heads bowed like cattle.

The Sergeant-Major dressed his lines as though on parade.

"Now then, step out, men. No lagging. We're on their heels. We'll show them——"

His own knees shook under him. Not so young any more. Broken down. Like an old cab-horse.

Please God he'd stop one before the men saw how it was with him! An old guardsman dropping in his tracks. He'd got to stiffen them. That's what he was there for. Morale.

Queer, muddled visions swam before his eyes—Emmeline—the tobacco shop—Chapel on Sundays—fading into the nightmare of mud—his dreadful weakness—his shame.

Lights on the horizon. Flashes that opened and closed like a flaming fan. They stared, fascinated. Every flash meant something—what, they didn't know. Not yet. Thud—thud under their feet, as their own tormented footsteps awoke echoes in the very bowels of the earth. Through the fog, transfused by moonlight, they caught glimpses of a strange, mournful country like the shadowy vision of a forsaken inferno. As the dawn broke they saw the convulsed earth, poisoned to its roots. Fred Smith, who had been a farm-labourer in East Suffolk and knew the earth, ran his tongue over his parched lips.

" They'll not grow nothing there—not for a hundred years," he said.

They were on a road flanked by gigantic gutters filled with refuse. They didn't care to look too close. Sometimes they were almost forced over the brink by lorries jolting past, driven by grim-faced men who didn't care what they drove over so long as they got where they were going—over pot-holes and sheer chasms that might have been dug out by a giant spade. Troops resting by the wayside who didn't speak, but who looked at you curiously and a little disdainfully, as though they knew something that you didn't.

You'd show them. . . .

And then no road at all. Trenches. Half-submerged duck-boards. Perhaps not so old, either. The barbed wire was freshly cut. There were bits of things that hadn't mouldered yet. Behind an artificial screen of wood and earth, like the nest of some sinister bird, Cobham recognized the wreck of a machine-gun and, huddled over it, a bundle of rags—rags of a dull green!

Cobham jerked his thumb.

"German."

And Rogers nodded.

"We must be almost up to 'em. Something big on. Gawd—wot a mess!"

Cobham tried to remember all he had ever learnt about machine-guns. No frontal attack. You wormed round them. On all sides. And then—bayonet work. Or, better still, a couple of well-planted grenades that would knock the crew clean out.

No more throwing into emptiness. Next time he took his aim it would be at men. His bayonet would go home into live flesh. He would know at last how it really felt. . . .

The dawn spread out, sickly and menacing, over the low, ragged sky. The gun-fire had died out. An ominous quiet brooded over the sodden devastation. Ahead of them a group of trees cowered together like grey skeletons twisted in the attitudes of a final agony. In all the tormented world about them they seemed the things the most sad, the most tormented.

They had been part of a peaceful village life, long forgotten. The village itself lay beyond them—a few

walls, a roofless cowshed—a chimney thrust up at the grey sky like an accusing finger.

The whistle sounded. They halted, swaying on their feet. The rhythm of the march was broken, and they could hardly stand. They muttered rumours to one another. They were awaiting reinforcements. They would be in touch with the enemy within an hour. A sergeant in charge of a ragged company on its way back to the rest-camp stared at them with inflamed eyes. Cobham heard him speak to the Sergeant-Major. His voice sounded unnatural, like that of a dusty machine.

Yes; there was dirty work ahead. The enemy retreating to new lines, fighting every inch of the way. Nests of machine-guns, like vipers, hidden at such angles that they enfiladed you from all sides. One machine-gun, handled by a single survivor, had torn his company to ribbons before they had knocked the fellow out.

They served out rum. That proved it. They only gave you rum when you were in for trouble. Within an hour they'd know. It would have happened.

Cobham and thirty men of his company found quarters in a cellar under the cowshed. The straw on the rancid earth smelt foul, and was infested by rats reckless with hunger. But they dropped where they stood. They lay stretched out side by side like dead men. A shaft of yellow light through a hole in the vaulted roof fell on Cuffy's upturned face. It was like the face of an overgrown child that had sobbed itself to sleep, still puckered and grimy with perplexity and grief. Cobham, seeing it, rolled over, fighting a dark, rising tide of exasperation.

But in their sleep they couldn't rest. Their aching feet still staggered over ruts and sank into pits of sucking slime. They pushed on. On and on. Somebody had started them off and they couldn't stop any more. The dark twilight about them was thick with their harsh breathing, the broken oaths and sighs of their excessive misery.

Cobham didn't want to rest. He wanted to get on with it. He couldn't rest, anyway. The rum had mounted to his brain and filled it with a succession of fantastic episodes. He was always fighting. This parry—that lunge. The damn cotter-pin that wouldn't come out. Now he was crawling forward on his stomach—a machine-gunner, spraying the advance, had his back to him. Another yard and Cobham would have planted six inches of cold steel in the fellow's ribs. But it never came to that. At the last moment the picture faded out. And Cobham rolled over, sweating, to begin again. He planned a new attack, rehearsing every trick and subterfuge that he had ever learnt. He wasn't afraid—not even of fear. But he was afraid of being slower than the other man, of being outwitted by that faceless enormity that was at last to come over the brow of the plains to meet him. Some fellows had been sniped before they had fired a shot.

"If only I don't lose my head," he thought; "if only I get a decent chance——"

He lay with his face to the evil-smelling earth, resting his aching back. He saw his name written against the red retina of his eyes.

"John Cobham. Lance-corporal. Killed in action."

What were the others thinking—the men who had lain here before them—the waves of other battles already spent? Perhaps the enemy had been here—the man he was to kill and the man who would kill him, lying with his face to the earth.

Someone was snoring. Like a bull. Cobham couldn't bear it. His nerves were fiddle-strings at which the sound plucked with brutal fingers. He kicked out savagely. The man scrambled to his feet with a harsh cry.

"Gawd—they're coming—they're coming!"

The straw was alive with writhing, twisting shapes. The stench became suddenly unendurable.

"Lie down, you fool! Keep quiet, can't you?"

"Then wot did 'e kick me for? Can't a poor devil rest?"

The wave subsided. Quiet again—feverish—broken by the twitching of limbs, the scuttling of rats. Cobham's head began to ache miserably. He thought of Madge. There were things he wanted to say to her. He'd been too proud—too shy. And now it was too late. Perhaps he could send a message. Rogers would give it to her. Rogers was lying next him. Surely Rogers would get through. He groped blindly through the dark.

"Rogers — old man — there's someone — a girl — Madge Andrews—lives 22 Chelham Place—if I stop one—I want you to tell her——"

Rogers drew away from him, moaning. He lay still. After all, it was of no use. You couldn't say the things you wanted to—not to anyone—not even to yourself. He dropped into a sort of emptiness that

was not sleep. And came out of it once to wonder what a bullet really sounded like when it sang past your ear. If you didn't hear it, it meant that it had got you. Somewhere. Supposing it didn't finish you? He imagined himself hanging on the barbed wire—he imagined unimaginable pain. He heard himself scream. . . .

No, not himself; someone overhead. Someone shouting. A rush of feet. The door of the cellar screeched on its hinges. Out of the depths of their stupefaction they leapt straight up—their rifles in their hands—turned to meet at last the thing that had governed their lives—that obsessed their dreams.

Cobham slipped out his bayonet. The bayonet for close quarters. His teeth were set. His breath laboured in a suffocating excitement. Something exploded deafeningly—close to him. The black confinement filled with a rush of sound, through which he heard distinctly the soft " plunk " of a bullet burying itself in the wall opposite. So—it was like that. But it had missed him. He had still his chance.

A man stood in the open doorway, his arms outstretched against the mournful light. He was yelling at them:

" For Gawd's sake keep yer 'eads, can't yer? It's over—they've signed—the Armistice. The war—over——"

Cobham heard someone laugh. What was that? What did they mean? Armistice! Who was that making that accursed noise? Cuffy—standing there under the hole of light—like a damn clown in a pantomime—shouting and waving.

"It's over—it's over—hurrah!—hurrah! We're going 'ome——"

"Stop that, you yellow livered hound!"

But Cuffy couldn't stop. He was giggling hysterically, like a drunken girl.

"Stop it—do you hear? Stop it—stop it——"

But he couldn't stop. Cobham swayed on his feet. He couldn't let go his breath. Armistice. The war. Eh? Over? These three years of tension, of shame. These six months. For nothing? His job gone. His girl. Not a shot fired. People laughing. Cheering. And what they had made of him—scrapped—useless. Over, was it? He let go his pent-up breath. He lurched over to Cuffy.

"Stop it!"

But you couldn't stop. . . .

He struck Cuffy in the teeth, with a kind of lust. He saw Cuffy's amazed eyes—just over the line of his fist—goggling at him.

"'Ere—wot cher think yo're doing? 'E's my pal——"

Fred Smith butting in. Red-faced, lowering, his head bent, like a charging bull.

"You leave 'im alone!"

"Two to one. Gawd! The swine! Blinkin' Conchies! Give it 'em—give it 'em!"

Rogers—good old Rogers!

It happened. It exploded. The pent-up force was released—at last. Cobham, with his free hand on Cuffy's throat, felt it break in himself like an abscess. It broke over him in a crushing wave of men's bodies —of beating, bruising hands and feet. He went down

under it. He couldn't save himself. He couldn't let go. He didn't want to. He'd got to choke the life out of someone—someone who'd done him out of something. As the thing under him went limp, he felt pain slide into him—penetrate to his very innermost being—a cold, white pain, bright, shining, that twisted his vitals, tearing the breath out of him. . . .

That idiotic old sack—dangling at the end of a cord—the round, chalked eyes and astonished mouth. . . .

" Grumph! Oh! What did you do that for, old man? What's the great idea? "

Six inches—no more. Because——

Bayonets—his bayonet——

Something went out of him. He collapsed—emptied. He felt the bones of his skull crack under a plunging boot.

They'd got him but—by God!—not before . . .

The Sergeant-Major held the boy subaltern back from the cellar door. The gesture was oddly protective. There were things these children shouldn't see—incredible things. The Sergeant-Major himself was bewildered by them. He looked old and broken.

" It's all over, sir. Don't you go in. Don't you go in. Decent, quiet-spoken men. Gawd knows wot got into them! They was like mad. . . ." He wiped the sweat from his mouth and looked up at the grey silence. " It was this 'ere Armistice," he said.

And later the C.O. dealt with the incident.

" After all," he told the Adjutant, " there will be

less truth told about this war than any war in history. We are so civilized."

And against the two names, "John Cobham" and "James Cuffy," he wrote: "Killed in action," with a steady hand.

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